93-02336/

Kazakhstan Diary

Impressions of a Post-Soviet Republic

James N. McCrorie
Canadian Plains Research Center
University of Regina
1992

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Regina, Saskatchewan S4S 0A2
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Canadian Cataloguing in Publication Data

McCrorie, James Napier, 1936-

Kazakhstan diary: impressions of a post-Soviet republic

(Occasional papers/University of Regina,
Canadian Plains Research Center, ISSN 0317-6304 ; 4)

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-88977-076-X

1. McCrorie, James Napier, 1936- – Diaries.
2. Kazakh S.S.R. – Description and travel. 3. Kazakh S.S.R. – Economic conditions. 4. Kazakh S.S.R. – Social conditions. I. University of Regina. Canadian Plains Research Center. II. Title. III. Series: Occasional papers (University of Regina. Canadian Plains Research Center) ; 4.

DK904.M37 1992 958'.4085 C93-098003-4

Printed and bound in Canada by
University of Regina Duplicating and Stationery Services

PREFACE

It seems a long time ago; a different world. The year was 1990, and in February I travelled for the first time to the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) as a member of a delegation of social scientists, invited there for the purpose of exploring the possibility of initiating and developing cooperative, comparative research between the prairie regions of Canada and the USSR.[1]

The delegates, representing the Canadian Plains Research Center (CPRC) at the University of Regina, were guests of the V.I. Lenin All Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences. We were received in Moscow by Academician Alexander Nikonov, President of the Academy and a member of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR. We then travelled to and met leading scientists in Leningrad, and Kharkov in the Ukraine. Upon our return to Moscow, an agreement between the Academy and the CPRC was entered into, committing each partner to explore and identify issues and problems that lent themselves to comparative study.

One year later, under the provisions of the Agreement, Dr. Mekhlis Kazimovitch Souleimenov, Director of the Institute for Grain Research in the Republic of Kazakhstan, visited Saskatchewan at the invitation of the CPRC.

Following lengthy discussions, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed on June 17, 1991, committing the CPRC and the Institute for Grain Research to develop a broad research proposal concerning soil conservation policies and practices in the prairie region of Canada and the northern prairie region of Kazakhstan.

The commitment contained the makings of a grand adventure. At issue were two comparable geographic regions in the northern hemisphere, each a major producer of cereal grains within its larger nation-state, each the creature of different and competing political economies, each suffering from a degree of soil erosion and land degradation that threaten its future as a producer of food.

But there was a risk. You cannot divorce the study of public policy and practices from the political economy and culture in which they have developed and taken root. It is difficult enough to describe and under-

1 The delegation was led by Dr. Lloyd Barber, President of the University of Regina and Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Canadian Plains Research Center. The other members were Mr. Douglas Daniels, Associate Professor of Sociology, Dr. Howard Leeson, Head, Department of Political Science, and Dr. James McCrorie, Professor of Sociology.

stand human behaviour in our own society — the opportunities for misunderstanding abound when one proposes to examine policies and practices in a society with a different history, a different political economy, a different language and a different culture.

This risk was driven home when I accepted an invitation to visit the Institute for Grain Research (Kazakhstan) in the spring of 1992. The purpose of the visit was to draw up a final memorandum of understanding that would provide a framework for the kind of comparative study we had envisaged. I realized, despite all the reading I had done, that I was about to enter a world that I barely knew and hardly understood.

The invitation to visit Moscow, then journey by train to Kazakhstan presented an opportunity to acquire first-hand impressions; a modest step to be sure in the difficult task of coming to know a different society and culture. I decided to keep a diary, recording my day-to-day observations, questions and reflections. Upon my return to Canada, I edited and rewrote the diary with a view to sharing my impressions, questions and thoughts with others.

A few observations about Kazakhstan are in order. The republic is located in the central Asian region of the former USSR. It is bounded on the west by the Volga River and the Caspian Sea. Three thousand kilometres to the east lie the Altai Hills and China. To the south lie the republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, separating Kazakhstan from Iran and Afghanistan. Some two thousand kilometres to the north rest the Ural Mountains and Siberia.

The total land mass is slightly larger than the territory encompassed by the three prairie provinces. The northern region of the republic is a broad, semi-arid plain, geographically similar and comparable to the southern prairie region of Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The southern, more fertile and climatically favourable region of the republic is separated from the northern plain by a large, arid and inhospitable desert.

According to the 1989 census, the population of Kazakhstan numbers 16,464,000. Of these, the Kazakhs account for 39.7 percent of the total; 37.8 percent are of Russian ancestry. Individuals of Ukrainian and German ancestry make up 5.4 percent and 5.8 percent respectively of the total.

While the economy of the republic is diversified among mining, manufacturing and aerospace industries, agriculture plays a central role. The republic accounts for 34 republic of all arable land in the former USSR. The northern prairie region of the republic was, along with southern Siberia, the location chosen for the innovative virgin-land policy of the 1950s. The republic now produces up to 14 percent of the cereal grains grown in the former USSR.

Since the breakup of the USSR, the government of the republic has taken

an active role in seeking ways and means of rebuilding economic and political ties, not only with the former republics of the union, but with nations in Asia as well as Europe and North America.

The voyage I am about to describe begins in Moscow, in the spring of 1992. I journeyed by train some 2,400 kilometres to the southeast, across the Russian steppe, over the Volga, up and through the Ural Mountains, then down across the northern Kazakhstan plain to Tselinograd, the city of the virgin land.

James N. McCrorie, Ph.D.
November 1992

Kazakhstan Diary 1992

Tuesday, June 2

08:00 hrs.: Arrive Heathrow airport from hotel in Hounslow. Terminal I is crowded with passengers destined to the four corners of Europe. The atmosphere is already muggy and many people have a wilted look.

Proceed to the gate for British Airways Flight 872 to Moscow. Security tight. Two policemen, one with a dog and the other with a machine gun of some description keep a watchful eye on all concerned.

Clear customs, to be greeted by a young lassie, standing outside the duty free, offering chits which entitle the lucky holder to a free bottle of Mackay's Scotch Whiskey. Few takers. Good grief. They can't even give that rubbish away.

Flight 872 is "on the board." Proceed to my gate. The waiting room is packed. People of all ages, gender, size and manner of dress. I later learn from one of the stewardesses that this flight, scheduled for seven days a week, has been upgraded to a Boeing 767-300, with a capacity for 247 passengers and a cruising speed of 542 mph. Today, there is not an empty seat to be had. I am advised that this is normal. "People are flocking to Moscow in droves," the stewardess confides.

We are scheduled to depart at 09:00 hrs and lift off at 09:40 hrs. Not bad for Heathrow. Begin the ascent to 37,000 feet, east over the North Sea.

I wonder who my fellow passengers are. Businessmen, students, diplomats, tourists, fellow travellers? Scientists such as myself? Who knows. I wonder what the Russians make of all this.

I recall my first and only flight to Moscow, in February 1990, when the USSR was either feared or admired as a socialist state. There was a different atmosphere in the aircraft's cabin then. A hint of mystery, a sense of anticipation, the spice of adventure. Nothing of that sort this morning. Not with this lot. This could be a morning Air Canada flight from Toronto to Montreal; worse: Montreal to Toronto. People reading. People munching. People looking bored. No one talking. Ah, the disenchantment with the world.

The flight is scheduled to last three-and-one-half hours. Below, we fly over a great jigsaw puzzle of cultivated fields, forest lots, dotted with bodies of water assuming every shape imaginable. Clear, bright, sunny. Below, the ancient lands and battlefields of Europe; ever so fetching and tranquil in the morning sun.

In the distance, out of the port window, the markings of a city appear on the horizon. Momentarily, the pilot comes on the intercom to

announce that we are approaching Berlin. For me, a strange sensation as we fly over the ancient Prussian capital. Can one begin to imagine the events that transpired in this city over the past 150 years? There it is, looking just like those maps one so often finds in histories of the Third Reich.

Our flight does not pause to reflect. We fly on. Just as well. The passengers on the port side of the aircraft barely took the time to turn their heads. I imagine their indifference and allow myself to become irritated. Serves me right. Plane travel is a shower. Should have taken the train.

Across the Oder and in another short interval, the Vistula. Then over Poland en route to Moscow.

16:10 hrs.: Touch down at Sheremetyevo airport. A variety of airlines have already parked their planes at the terminal: Lufthansa, Aeroflot, Air France, Nippon, Korea, British Airways. I wonder what their passengers are up to? One can be assured that it is not a meeting of the Communist International.

Before disembarking, it is announced that we must fill out a customs form. Unfortunately, we are told, the Russian government failed to provide British Airways with same. Forms are to be retrieved in the terminal and filled out there. This should be fun.

Come ashore and enter the familiar terminal: huge, modern, gloomy. Why gloomy? Memories of the winter of 1990. Not sufficient lighting. How come? Too expensive? A mischievous act of symbolism? Why design an attractive, spacious, modern building then ruin the effects for the price of a few light bulbs? This is Russia, the heart of the former USSR. Why not?

Three long queues form behind three dimly lit sentry boxes. For a change, I choose the right one; at least it moves less slowly than the others. What are these customs' clerks up to? They claim they have opened the country up to market forces, western capitalists, foreign advice, etc. What are they worried about? Of course today's discharge of passengers from afar will include rip-off artists of all descriptions. What do they expect? Or maybe I have missed the point. Bureaucracy. This is how it was done in the old days. Nothing changes. There must be a routine and affairs so ordered as to induce that kind of human stupor that finely succumbs to bureaucratic madness. I see.

And I am not disappointed. After I clear the gloomy barrier, with a flash of a smile and a pleasant "good afternoon" in my best Russian (which illicits a curious but not unpleasant glance from the stern young man behind the desk) I go to the right queue to clear the final barrier,

suddenly recall that I have failed to fill out the "missing" forms, change tack, and finally, after much frustration, discover a pile of the odious forms tastefully laid out around an unmarked pillar. It is sustaining more than the roof above, it occurs to me. Never mind. Fill out the bloody form. Same one I filled out in 1990, I discover. Never mind. On with it. List currency in hand. Declare goods being brought in. Piece of cake. Wrong. Having respected local laws and customs and done my duty, herewith my reward. A dour young man scans the sacred document, runs his pencil through all my written entries, and orders me through. Well done comrade, citizen, or whatever you call yourself these days. Another stroke, albeit with a pencil, in the service of the working class. My goodness. What rubbish.

Clear the barrier, and there to greet me is Mekhlis Kazimovitch Souleimenov, director of the largest agrarian research institute in Kazakhstan and a member of that republic's academy of sciences. We are both relieved and delighted to see each other.

He has a car at his disposal. We push through the mass of human beings who are milling about the exit to the airport and proceed to the car. Gear is stowed aboard and off we go for the city centre. The driver is very polite and competent.

Broad streets, boulevards, lined with memorable trees and block apartments, road surfaces like Regina in the spring. After a few kilometres, we pass a great monumental, concrete hedgehog on the south side of the road, commemorating the place at which the Soviets halted the Nazi assault on their capital city in World War II. I mention this to Mekhlis and our chauffeur takes note. A kid, but he takes note.

And then the shock. Great billboards by the side of the road, in English, celebrating SANYO, computers, Chevrolet, Cadillac. There are even "Stop" signs now, in English. I comment aloud, in disbelief. Mekhlis merely acknowledges the new reality, without comment. I declare this advertising vandalism for what it is: an insult to the Russian people. Can you imagine the outcry in Toronto or Vancouver if the former USSR had dared to advertise the wares and features of the promised land along their airport roads, using the Cyrillic alphabet? Such cheek would never pass muster in Montreal.

We finally, after an interval of about forty minutes, reach the downtown of Moscow. We wheel into a boulevard, with a park and pond in the middle, fenced on both sides, as it were, with tram tracks, and stop in the front of a plain-faced building, being the hotel in which Mekhlis has taken residence.

We jump out, reclaim our gear, bid farewell to our intrepid driver, and enter the hotel. It is but a variation on a theme, I sense correctly. The

building is rectangular, four storeys high. When you enter and clear the vestibule, with its resident concierge, you come into a splendid hall, around which is built a series of floors, all looking into the hall, giving a great sense of presence. The rooms and attached bathrooms are Spartan, accommodating two individuals, whether you like it or not. On the one hand, simple and to the point. This is not a privileged society, at least to date. If you travel on business or work, why not share a room? Think of others who labour, help to pay the bill, and never get the chance to venture forth.

But there is something wrong. It is this magnificent hall. There is something missing. Why should such an architectural promise appear tacky? There is a promise here, and a disappointment. I refresh myself in Mekhlis's room and make a mental note.

17:00 hrs.: We depart the hotel and head for the metro, at the end of the street. The station is named after Kirov. The broad pavement outside the entrance is cluttered with entrepreneurs of every description. Some have set up shop in permanent kiosks; others work from makeshift tables or overturned boxes. Cigarettes, candy, books, magazines, vegetables, beer, vodka, shoes, scarfs, stationary, bread. A regular market, doing a thriving trade. The shopkeepers are either young, or very old. No "in betweens" here. Men and women alike. All hustling.

They have a scruffy appearance, which contrasts with the pedestrians milling about or passing by. Neatly dressed. Shoes appear to be of quality. Women are quite stylish. Men in neat business suits, attractive ties (on the conservative side); many carrying briefcases. This could be London, or Hamburg, or Montreal. The atmosphere is one of a good standard of living; confidence.

Not quite, as it turns out. We enter the metro station and the pedestrian tunnel is lined with beggars. Gypsies, I am told, interspersed with "veterans" of Afghanistan with missing limbs. One old woman sits motionless, cradling a small baby in one arm and holding a tin cup with the other. Passengers rush by and press on. Most ignore this pitiable sight, but some are quite solicitous and generously dispense ruble notes.

We purchase our tokens and clear the barrier. The station platform is grubby, yet it has just been swept clean. How is this for a paradox? We just miss the train. Old carriages, jammed with humanity. In less than a minute, another train speeds into the station and screeches to a halt. Again, old carriages. But a train every sixty seconds? This is service.

Our carriage is packed; standing room only. All the passengers seem self absorbed. Some read; others stare forward, vacantly. No conversations. Again, one could be on a London tube or the Montreal metro. A metropolitan mode of travel, with matching metropolitan behaviour. Again,

everyone is neatly turned out. I am surprised to discover some young men and women wearing a crucifix, held about their neck on a chain. I mention this to Mekhlis, who observes that this is a new custom, quite popular among the young throughout the various former republics of the USSR. We speak in English, of course, to the studied indifference of our fellow passengers pressed against us. So metropolitan, these Muscovites.

We alight at the station beneath Dzerzinskogo Place. We make our way up into the sunlight and there, before us and facing the station entrance, is the headquarters of the KGB. The statue in memory of Felix Dzerzinski — the founder of the Soviet secret police — is conspicuous by its absence. Those occupying front offices of the KGB headquarters now have an uninterrupted view of the Children's Palace, housed in an imposing building directly across the square. A troubling paradox, this juxtaposition of a children's world and the terrible business of a secret police.

We walk down 25 October Prospect in the direction of Red Square. An elderly man, in tattered apparel, staggers along the street, in flow with the automobile traffic, celebrating the memory of Joseph Stalin and bellowing for a return of the red terror. No one turns a head. Poor Stalin, reduced to this. Championed in vain by an ancient drunk.

We pass by the buildings that used to house bureaus of the Soviet Communist Party. Some still bear signs appropriate to the old order. Then into Red Square, gleaming in the early evening sunlight.

To my surprise, there are not many people about. A wedding party is having its picture taken in front of Lenin's tomb, which is closed today to the public. Strange. This small party of celebrants, almost alone in this vast, historic square. A number of militia patrol the perimeter of the square, enjoying the good weather. A young man appears from nowhere and offers, in flawless English, to sell me a photo book on Moscow. I decline and ask Mekhlis how the hustler knew that I spoke English. "They are shrewd in these matters," he replies. We walk away, leaving the vast empty, but memorable, square behind us.

We return to the hotel by the same route. I learn that we are invited out for a meal, guests of a young women who has offered to put me up for the night.

The invitation, of course, is a singular honour. I know of no Canadians — before and since the collapse of the USSR — who have been so singled out.

My hostess to be is a young, single woman — Marina Valeryevna Gaidina. She resides in a street named after a World War II female Soviet air ace, by the name of Osipenko. The street is located southeast of the Kremlin, on a small island in the middle of the Moscow River.

We take a tram. Traffic is light. All boarding passengers faithfully

observe the honour system and punch their own tickets, on a little machine affixed to the bulkhead of the streetcar.

The tram moves off to the east, along the boulevard on which Mekhlis's hotel is located. Then it arcs to the south. Moscow's streets, I learn, are organized in concentric rings, around the Kremlin and Red Square. Quite attractive. An instance of urban planning? One is reminded of Edinburgh, with a difference. Scotland's ancient capital is neat, dressed out in rich green parks and decorated, at this time of year, with garden upon garden of flowers. Moscow, it would appear, lacks both. Why?

The tram rolls down Ustjinski Prospect, over the Moscow River, across the island and over the river again. Mekhlis asks an elderly lady for directions. She politely complies and instructs us to get off at the next tram stop. We alight and walk back to Osipenko Street. Broad, well treed, with apartment blocks on either side. My guess is that the buildings date back to the early postwar period. Perhaps they are older.

Mekhlis has warned me that our hostess will be nervous. She had never entertained a foreigner before and she fears that her modest accommodation will be disappointing. It turns out that Marina Valeryevna is the cousin to the Scientific Secretary of the Grain Research Institute in Kazakhstan. It was through her that the arrangement was made.

We arrive at her apartment block and enter by a side door. The courtyard, between the apartment buildings, is made up of dirt, weeds and patches of unkept grass. Someone has parked a car, which has seen better days.

We climb two flights of stairs. The stairwell could do with a good airing. We come to Marina's door and ring the bell. We are greeted by an attractive, slim, petite young woman with a shy, nervous smile. My jet lag vanishes in a flash.

We are bid welcome and enter into what is a common foyer. Two other individuals share this community apartment: an elderly retired woman who has lived here all her life and a middle-aged, single worker.

We are invited to remove our shoes and presented with slippers, which we dutifully don and accept an invitation to tour the premises. We are joined, at this point, by Marina's friend, a trim, handsome young man, eager to assist and, indeed, take charge.

We turn to our right and inspect the communal kitchen, a rectangular room off of which is the bathroom, with sink, ancient bathtub, and

sundry pails. Not your "home and gardens" scheme, but functional. Reminds me of working-class Montreal, vintage 1940.[2]

Back to the foyer, off of which are an additional four closed doors. Three lead to private, one-room apartments. The fourth leads to the "W.C." (water closet), announces Marina's boyfriend in very good English. He proudly steps forward, proceeds to open the door, only to discover that it does not respond to his command. He mutters something in Russian, flicks the light switch beside the offending door, and is greeted with shouts and oaths from within. We all freeze, and in a moment the door is flung open and out of the dark storms the old indignant worker from the room next door. He angrily dismisses what I take to be an offer of apology and with as much dignity as he can muster, disappears into his private apartment.

We in turn take refuge in Marina's. The contrast with the communal quarters is striking. The room is simply but tastefully furnished and decorated. A bookcase, filled with artifacts, a stereo system and books, covers one wall. On the adjacent wall is hung a magnificent carpet and both Marina and her friend are surprised when I take note of it. By the window is set a table, with beautiful china. Again, simple but artistic. The table warms the room without dominating it. This combination of simplicity with a sense of colour and form appeals to my Scottish, Calvinist instincts. And to think that the woman who created this ambience was kind enough to invite me — sight unseen — to share it for a night. I am deeply touched. It is great to be alive and I settle down to enjoy a long evening. I am not disappointed.

It is now well into the evening. Marina provides a meal. And what a meal. Fresh, sliced cucumber; brilliant red radishes; green onions; sliced sausage; horse meat and vodka, courtesy of Mekhlis; bread and cheese. A Czar's ransom, by current prices and wages, as I am about to discover.

There is a custom in Russia, and I suspect in all the other republics which recently made up the USSR — one marries the consumption of neat vodka, good food and better company — all in the ceremony of toasts.

We talk and toast; endless talk and toasts. Everything is unexpected, I am told. Everyone is now wanting, in simple material things. "My mother refuses to shop," Marina says sadly. "She cannot accept what has

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2 Ambassador Robert Ford places the housing issue in historical perspective when he records in his memoirs that the Soviet Union was forced, as a result of the devastation of World War II, to rebuild many large urban centres from scratch. See Robert A.D. Ford, *Our Man in Moscow: A Diplomat's Reflections on the Soviet Union* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1989).

happened." Yet, people do not grumble, Marina and her friend acknowledge. "What would Canadians do?" they anxiously inquire.

I invite them once again to review their litany of woes: outrageous prices against inadequate wages. I reply, in no uncertain terms. They are puzzled by my aggressive stance. They reflect, without disrupting the drift of the evening. Finally, Marina's friend observes: "The problem is this. It is at the top. They quarrel. At the bottom, there is no problem. We want to get along." He continues in this vein; his scepticism concerning the political leadership of his nation becomes unmistakable. He concludes by reminding us that "labour is the source of all wealth." I have heard this claim before, of course. This time there is a difference. This young kid believes what he says.

It is interesting. Marina's young friend is sanguine about the future. Hard work, he asserts, will see one through and turn the nation around. Marina is not so sure. She hints that hard work alone will not resolve the difficulties facing individuals and society. She refers to the changed political climate which welcomes candour in private and public discourse. But she laments the loss of economic security and well being.

It is late. We all pitch in and clean up. Marina puts away the remnants of the meal and makes up a bed. The rest of us retire to the kitchen and with the cockroaches looking on, wash up the dishes.

Marina, who has graciously given me the use of her apartment, retires to spend the night with friends, accompanied by the others. I am left alone to contemplate what I have seen and heard. It has been a long day, and a great one.

Wednesday, June 3

07:30 hrs.: I awake, shave and dress. The W.C. is a bit of a hoot. The old worker had apparently removed the toilet seat and hung it on a nail in the wall. I wonder if this fashion will catch on at home?

Marina and Mekhlis arrive at 08:00 hrs. Marina makes breakfast: sliced cucumbers, sausage, bread, cheese and tea. She inquires as to when I intend to return to Moscow. When I give her the date, she expresses disappointment. She and her friends had hoped to take me on a tour of Moscow. My date of return coincides with a civic holiday and she has plans to visit her parents in the Ukraine.

Before leaving, I assure her that it was an honour to be invited to stay in her apartment. Mekhlis and I thank her for her kindness. She is delighted.

When we enter Osipenko Street, the sidewalks on either side are bustling with pedestrian traffic. Again, most people are well dressed. I

notice more military uniforms this morning. A lot of officers, in their middle age.

We catch a tram and return to Mekhlis's hotel. Dr. Alexander Nikonov, the last President of the V.I. Lenin All Union Academy of Agricultural Sciences, has agreed to receive us at ten. A mentor to and friend of Mikhail Sergeiovitch Gorbachev, he had received the CPRC's delegation to the USSR in February 1990 and had encouraged the development of research linkages with the republics of the Union. I remember him as an economist of great philosophical depth. His office is still in the Yusupov House, once occupied by an aristocrat of the same name — one of several who assassinated Rasputin. The Yusupov House is located in Kharitonievsy Perulok, at the end of a street that runs into our boulevard. It is a warm sunny day and we choose to walk.

10:00 hrs.: We arrive at the Yusupov House. The courtyard is empty. Two years ago, it was jammed with parked cars. We enter the house. The main foyer and all the rooms opening onto it are deserted. Only the imprints on the dusty floors suggest where furniture once rested.

We ascend the massive staircase to the second floor. A tattered carpet muffles our approach. We reached the landing. There is no one about. Mekhlis knows the way and proceeds towards a large, closed door. I follow.

We enter a large room and are greeted by an elderly secretary. The room is sparsely furnished. She disappears through another door, then returns with Alexander Nikonov.

He is still the great bear of a man that I remember. We are greeted warmly and retire into his office. I expect a brief meeting, for this is, after all, a courtesy call. In fact, it lasts for two hours.

Nikonov is one of many economists who advocated reform. Well into his seventies, a veteran of World War II and a survivor of Stalin, he has now been made the director of a new research institute to study the establishment of new modes of agricultural production. He does not hide the fact that he has few staff and less money. It is a far cry from the days when he presided over all the agricultural academies of science in the USSR.

He is by turn sad, angry, optimistic. How, he asks rhetorically, can the work of scientists be divided along nationalist lines? He laments what he considers to be the artificial barriers that increasingly isolate scientists in one republic from their colleagues in the others.

He moves the discussion on to the topic of family farming. He views this as an attractive mode of production, both for reasons of efficiency and "work" morale. Although his observations are of a general character,

he seems to be of the view that family farms, at least in countries like Canada, make the best use of available capital and labour. Since they manage as well as work their farms, there is among family members a degree of personal identity with the productive process that is absent among workers on collective farms. He acknowledges that it is difficult to introduce this mode of production into the republics of the former USSR. Many are wary of entering into new productive relationships. There is much local resistance.

He cites the case of one dairy farm that was successfully organized around family relationships. Local resistance, in this case, was eventually overcome when the family developed a reputation for providing quality products on a reliable basis.

At the same time, he reminds us that while family farming is more accountable and responsible, the experience in the USSR has been collective. He agrees that it is difficult to make the transition from one system to another.

In the course of his remarks, Nikonov displays a favourable attitude towards Canada. He is particularly appreciative of the record of family farming in a province like Saskatchewan, one which geographically has much in common with major wheat-growing areas of the former USSR. When I suggest that many family farms on the Canadian Prairies today face insurmountable financial difficulties, that many families are on the verge of bankruptcy, the point does not seem to register. Insofar as agriculture is concerned, Canada in general and Saskatchewan in particular are viewed as enjoying an enviable record of achievement. I have the terrible suspicion that my modest attempts to set the record straight are taken as diplomatic tokens of modesty.

The conversation turns to a discussion of the Yeltsin reforms. Nikonov expresses serious reservations. It is his view that reforms must be orderly, at a pace that people can manage and accept. They must not be permitted to leave more serious problems in their wake. He is visibly troubled by the current state of affairs.

He refers to a number of non-Marxist economists of an earlier era and launches into a discussion of the late Pitirim Sorokin, whose Russian works he clearly admires. He is surprised and delighted to learn that Sorokin's scholarship is both well known and admired in North America, that he remains one of the intellectual giants in the field of sociology. I mention that his papers are collected and held at the University of Saskatchewan.[3] My suggestion that Nikonov arrange to visit the Univer-

3 For a critical comment on Sorokin's contribution to sociological theory, see James N.

sity of Saskatchewan for the purpose of reviewing the Sorokin files is well received.

I ask after Dr. Ernst, Nikonov's long-serving deputy. A phone call is made and momentarily Ernst joins us for a brief exchange. Another bear of a man, jovial as ever, brimming with anecdotes, most of them humorous.

When Ernst leaves, the conversation focusses on the new era of commercial entrepreneurship. Nikonov does not equivocate. The commercial markets, he declares, are being taken over by the Mafia. They are gaining control over the supply of a wide range of goods and services, he claims. They are capturing more and more outlets and linking them into their network. Protection money is a condition of trade. This new element in society is becoming powerful and dangerous.

Nikonov expresses regret over the breakup of the USSR. In science alone, he suggests, the result is unnecessary and an expensive duplication of work. He expresses his admiration for Gorbachev. He believes his former student is the victim of unfair criticism.

We are all surprised to discover that it is noon. We bid farewell. There is great warmth and kindness in this man. It is sad to leave him, alone in the deserted Yusupov House.

Mekhlis and I return to the hotel for lunch, which is served in a plain room on the ground floor. A rather unappetizing meal, served cafeteria-style by a female staff in white uniforms and hair nets. Interesting. The meal, the decor of the room, the dress and bearing of the staff all complement one another. A study in the symmetry of drabness.

After lunch, we go on a shopping spree to gather provisions for the train trip to Kazakhstan. We head in the direction of the Kremlin. Again we walk past historic buildings, many associated with the government and politics of the old regime. In the distance, the Bolshoi Theatre, a magnificent structure from the outside and aptly named. (*Bolshoi* in Russian means large, or great.)

We come upon a shop that sells meat and dairy products. It is about 14:00 hrs. and the queues are reasonable. Mekhlis joins one, for the purpose of selecting sausage, canned fish and cheese. I join the other, for the purpose of paying the bill.

The line moves slowly, leaving ample time to take in the surroundings. The walls are done in white tile; still, the shop is gloomy. Two large windows open out onto the street. Across them is strung a line with

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McCrorie, "Changing Times: Relevant Theory," 10th Memorial Sorokin Lecture, University of Saskatchewan, 1979.

coloured, plastic balls and cubes. Ugly as sin. The windows could do with a wash. There is an odour about the place, a hint of milk gone sour. Spoiled meat, perhaps?

The staff are dressed in white coats. Their work habits match their appearance: sloppy, indifferent. Their attitude towards their customers reminds me of some professors, who choose to regard students as a nuisance. Yet, no one complains.

Mekhlis joins me with several slips of paper, on which is noted each item of purchase and its price. When I reach the cashier, I present the slips and dutifully pay the bill. This done, we return to the original queue with the checked slips. These are presented to a clerk in exchange for our purchases.

It is a relief to return to the fresh air. We begin the return journey to the hotel. I notice several canvases draping buildings under construction, announcing, in the Arabic alphabet, the name of the foreign construction company. One is Austrian, another Italian. Neither deigns to use the Cyrillic alphabet. A symbol of arrogance.

We stop at a kiosk to purchase two bottles of vodka. The vendor becomes quite friendly when he discovers that his customer is a Canadian. A member of the Mafia? One hundred and fifty rubles per bottle; 300 rubles for two. Not bad, I think. Three Canadian dollars for twenty-six ounces of Russia's finest. The contrast with Canada is more than a matter of price. While I believe it is fair to record that we favourably compare with our northern Soviet neighbours when it comes to an affinity for spiritual refreshment, we still insist in procuring the pleasures of life through government-controlled liquor boards. No longer so in the new Russian Federation. An unpainted, wooden shack by the side of the public pavement is the conventional outlet for relief over here. I suppose the Americans might approve, if the Russian mafiosa took pains to paint the kiosks and tart them up.

We hop the metro and return to the Kirov station. Outside, we complete our purchases, adding tomatoes, green onions and bread to our provisions. Including the vodka, the bill comes to 700 rubles. I declare this to be a bargain but Mekhlis gently disagrees. It is no bargain, he points out, when you remember that the average monthly wage is no more than 3,000 rubles. I am stunned. Almost one-third of a monthly wage to provision a two-and-a-half day train journey.

We return to the hotel and stow our provisions. Then, it is across the city by metro to the offices of the Russian Federation Academy of Agricultural Sciences.

16:00 hrs.: We arrive at the Academy and walk up to the third floor, where

we are received in a bright and spacious office by Academician Ivan Makarov, Learned Secretary of the Russian Academy.

A short, stocky man with a round smooth face and wavy silver hair. I am welcomed to the Academy and invited to comment on the purpose of my visit to Kazakhstan. I do so, briefly, taking the opportunity to mention that we are writing up a study of family farming in Saskatchewan and will publish the results. He expresses an interest in having the study translated and republished in Russia.

He goes on to stress the importance of developing international relations among scientists. Like Nikonov, he deplores the breakup of the USSR. The very mention of the subject visibly pains him. He goes on to name a number of colleagues in the Russian Republic who were born and educated in others. He adds that the breakup of the USSR is causing much hardship and anxiety in the scientific community.

Mekhlis faithfully translates for both of us. I notice, however, a certain bond between the two scientists: the one elderly and Russian, the other my age and Kazakh. I learn later that it was Makarov who assisted Mekhlis in acquiring an official car for our trip from the airport to the city.

At the conclusion of the conversation — for this is indeed a courtesy rather than a business call — I am surprised and indeed flattered by the presentation of a medallion, commemorating the memory of the celebrated scientist, N.I. Vavilov.[4] In February 1990, the CPRC's delegation spent a day at the Institute in Leningrad which bears his name.

In parting, Makarov makes it clear that Canada in general and Saskatchewan in particular are held in esteem by agricultural scientists in the former USSR. I reply that we are both "peoples of the north." The observation is warmly received.

It is a short walk from the Academy to the metro station, located in one of the residential suburbs of Moscow. There is a subtle change to the vistas. As we walk along I notice that the pedestrians are not as well dressed as those one discovers strolling about the inner city. Many of the young men wear T-shirts, with American or European slogans printed on them. It is almost as if they are boasting: "Look at me. See where I have been."

As we approach the metro station, vendors appear, some working out of kiosks, some out of paper bags. One enterprising soul has a pair of

4 Nikolai Ivanovich Vavilov (1887-1943) was an internationally known geneticist, remembered for his collection of plants and plant seeds, while director of the All Union Institute for Plant Culture in Leningrad. His opposition to Lysenko resulted in imprisonment. He died in a concentration camp.

ladies' shoes for sale, along with books and cigarettes. Some pedestrians stop, examine the merchandise, inquire as to price, then shuffle off, muttering to no one in particular. I suggest to Mekhlis that there is some question in the public mind as to the popularity of these new pioneers of the market economy. He agrees.

There is something tacky about the whole scene. It is not just the presence of the street vendors. I notice unrepaired broken windows in some of the buildings. Here and there, a public sign has been disfigured. On the escalator down to the subway platform, a number of the light bulbs have burnt out and have not been replaced. This suburban station is quite plain, but the Kirov and others in the core of the city are quite elaborate: great marble structures, palatial in their effect. Yet, like the airport, the lighting is wrong, creating a gloomy effect. Why can't they get it right? Or has someone chosen not to get it right?

We return to the hotel for an early evening meal. The contrast of this meal and this dining room with North American standards is mind-boggling. Lunch rooms in interprovincial bus stations across Canada offer better fare and service, and more inviting venues. Yet the guests in the dining room tonight are not disappointed. They accept what is offered, then go about their affairs.

The train for Kazakhstan is due to depart at 19:30 hrs. Following supper, I venture out alone and stroll down the boulevard. There are quite a few people about: young, middle-aged, old; women with children in prams; well-dressed men and women rushing to catch a tram. The centre of the boulevard is in fact a park, about half a block wide, lined on each side with trees. At the eastern end is a large pond, home to a number of water birds. A youngster is fishing. There are park benches throughout, with a wooden pavilion at the centre.

The entire conception is an urban planner's dream. But there is something wrong. The benches need a coat of paint, and in several cases they are in need of repair. What once was a grass lawn has given way to large patches of bare dirt, dandelions and weeds of several varieties. The conception of a green oasis amidst a street of hotels, apartments and offices has become an eyesore. Why? I am at a loss for an answer.

When I return to the hotel, our car has arrived and the driver is packing our gear. Then it is off to the Kazanski Station, located across a broad street from the Leningrad Station, northeast of the Kremlin.

19:10 hrs.: We arrive at the station. What a sight. The huge plaza in front of the station entrance is a sea of humanity. All ages, shapes and sizes. Sailors with kit bags. Old women with great paper parcels, held together with string. Suitcases, boxes of all sizes. Some men and women neatly dressed. Others sporting less-expensive garb. Across the plaza, up

against the station wall and near to the entrance, a silver band strikes up and provides a carnival air to the early evening. Here and there, beggars and what I take to be Gypsies ply their trade. Now a group of young soldiers stroll by, the anticipation of leave written all over their smiling, sun-tanned faces. They head in the direction of a gaggle of young, attractive girls. People struggling with more baggage than they can handle. People dashing for the station entrance. People embracing, kissing, bidding farewell. Smiles, laughter, the press of humanity all about. Rail travel, the train — it is the only way to go. We are a special breed, those of us who choose to journey by train. You can sense that special feeling, right here in the plaza.

I fail to contain my excitement, much to Mekhlis's amusement. He is of the view, I should record, that we are travelling by train because the Kazakhstan Academy cannot afford the air passage. A red herring.

Our driver insists in carrying some of our baggage and accompanies us into the station. It is a giant, imposing structure, built in what I call the Kaiser Wilhelm style. Inside, one can hardly move for people. The air is hot and humid. Since most Russian adults do not favour underarm deodorant, the aroma, to put it gently, is very human.

We press forward to the gate leading to the platform holding the train for Tselinograd. It is a relief to break out once again into the fresh air. There is, however, no relief from the crowds. The platform is jammed with prospective passengers and their relatives or friends. The train is made up of nineteen carriages, one of which is the baggage car and another the restaurant car. The platform is not long enough to accommodate them all. Those assigned seats or berths at the head of the train have to scramble down onto the tracks and make their way forward. Memories of Windsor Station, in Montreal, in the early 1950s, when I was in service with the CPR. Ah for the good old days. Steam engines and civilized travel.

We reach our carriage and Mekhlis is arrested at the entrance by a short, stocky women of Kazakh ancestry. She is dressed out neatly in uniform: blue skirt, white blouse, red tie, and a wedge hat sitting smartly atop her round face.

It is not quite a conversation they are having. She appears to shout questions, utter declarations, and demand the presentation of papers. I wonder if she is indeed an employee of the railway company. Militia, perhaps? A person of considerable authority, no doubt.

At one point during the "interrogation" she favours me with a sharp, disapproving glance. An exchange of views follows. Then, with visible irritation, Mekhlis and I are "ordered" aboard the train.

We share a coupe — a compartment containing an upper and lower

berth, permanently fixed to the head-end bulkhead. There is a wash basin at the opposite corner, covered by a lid which, when in the down position, converts the basin into a corner table. The tail-end bulkhead is covered with a curtain, which conceals hooks and coat hangers. Linen, towels and blankets have been placed on the upper and lower berth. There is a vase of plastic flowers on the corner table. White, tatty curtains cover the window. Neat, compact and unbearably hot. The window is fixed and will not open. We presume the carriage is air conditioned, and hope that the system kicks in when the train moves. But this is Russia where, I am learning, it is dangerous to be presumptuous.

19:30 hrs.: The train gently pulls away from the station, on time. The air conditioning kicks in, to our great relief. Mekhlis sets about to prepare a feast of horse meat, sausage, cheese, cucumber, green onions and tomatoes. A piece of wrapping paper serves as a table cloth. Mekhlis's pocket knife is put to work. A bottle of vodka is opened. Two glasses, like magic, are retrieved from Mekhlis's suitcase. Moscow rolls by our window, as the train clears the station yards and gathers speed. This is what life is all about. A good companion, fine food, splendid drink, going from one place to another as civil folk prefer: by train.

Some hours later, in a state of grace, I repair to the toilet at the end of the carriage. It was a matter of necessity turning into a mistake. My brother-in-law's pig barn gives less offence. Enough said. I return to my compartment, turn in for the night and drift off to sleep, breathing in air that has been perfumed by the aromas of body sweat and a peeled onion. An interesting blend and not at all unpleasant.

Thursday, June 4

08:00 hrs.: Awake well rested and refreshed. Shave and dress, grit my teeth and head for the toilet. There is a lineup so I queue and watch the countryside speed by. Rolling country, vast fields of wheat, often blocked from view by kilometre upon kilometre of windbreaks made by trees. Everything fresh and green. There seems to be no end to the windbreaks, on both sides of the tracks. Then suddenly, open space, as far as the eye can see. Not a building, nor a beast, nor a human in sight. Here we are; a night's journey, southeast of Moscow, speeding through the vast interior steppe of Russia. It is awesome.

When I return to the compartment, Mekhlis has kindly laid on breakfast: horse meat, sausage, cheese, cucumber, green onions, bread. He suggests a sniff of vodka but I decline. Just as well, as it turns out.

We open our compartment door and take in the sights and sounds along the companionway. Presently our conductress appears, for the first of two routine cleanups. It is the same plump little regimental sergeant

major who put Mekhlis through his paces the night before. Her name is Clara (Culanda in Kazakh). I insist we refer to her as the Commissar. Mekhlis agrees that it is an acceptable, indeed appropriate title.

After vacuuming the companionway and covering the clean carpet with a dirty, canvas runner, she begins an assault on the compartments. When she enters ours, she takes the opportunity to remind us that she placed two, not one blanket in our coupe and that she expects them to be there when we detrain in Tselinograd. Pointing her finger, she announces that on her last trip, two blankets were stolen. She leaves us with a suspicious look on her face.

09:20 hrs.: The train arrives at Penza, in the middle of the forest-steppe region southeast of Moscow. We are here for twenty minutes. Mekhlis and I detrain and stroll along the platform. Bright sunny day. This is a large station, with at least five platforms on one side of ours. All are crowded. Some people are detraining. Others appear to be waiting for friends or relatives to arrive. Others are pushing their way through the milling crowd, looking for their carriage. Vendors, many of them old women, are hocking anything from vodka and lemonade to radishes, cucumbers, hot boiled potatoes. The place is alive with activity.

When we return to our carriage, the Commissar is in a heated conversation with the conductor from the next carriage; a tall, thin, earnest young man. He glances several times in our direction, as though they are talking about us. But nothing comes of it and the Commissar bustles us on the train, well before the scheduled time of departure.

Mekhlis is beside himself with laughter. "I must tell you about the Commissar's conversation. The part I overheard is very amusing," he says.

Turns out I was correct. They had been talking about us. Who is the foreigner, the young conductor wanted to know. Just a foreigner, the Commissar had replied. Only when pressed did she acknowledge that I was from Canada. Well, the young conductor had suggested, perhaps we should talk to him. "What for? What would you talk to him about?" she had snapped. "Maybe hockey," the young conductor had replied hopefully. "Mind your own business," the Commissar had ordered. "Foreigners are trouble," she added. "Recently I had another foreigner in my carriage. He was from Germany. They stole his things. It caused me trouble. I had to fill out reports. Foreigners are trouble. Leave him alone."

My sense of mischief takes charge. Up until now, Mekhlis and I had been the object of undisguised hostility. I wager that I can break the Commissar down and win a smile. Mekhlis is doubtful, but at the first opportunity he engages her in conversation, then dutifully translates for me.

I inquire about her service with the railroad, knowing with certainty that this topic always breaks the ice with veteran railroaders — it doesn't. I admire her uniform and I am greeted with an "*umpf.*" I ask about her family and barely receive a civil reply. When she acknowledges, however, that she is a grandmother, I feign surprise and exclaim: "But you are too young to be a grandmother." I am rewarded with a broad grin.

The train is scheduled to stop at Syzran on the western bank of the Volga in the early afternoon. Unbeknownst to me, Mekhlis has arranged in advance for a number of directors of research institutes en route to meet the train at an appointed hour and reprovision us with food and drink. The quality of both aboard the train is poor and the price expensive.

13:48 hrs.: The train arrives in Syzran; Mekhlis and I detrain. We walk down the platform in the direction of the station entrance. No one but strangers. We return to our carriage door and continue in the direction of the head end, with the same result. As we begin the walk back, Mekhlis notices a familiar face coming towards us. It belongs to Ivan Andreyovitch Chudanov, the director of a research institute at Bezenchuk some seventy kilometres to the east, on the other side of the Volga. The institute undertakes research in the Samarah-Kubichov region.

Introductions are made and we return to our carriage, where Chudanov's driver is standing, holding a large, brown box. The Commissar is standing by, eyeing the driver with suspicion.

At Mekhlis's suggestion, the four of us board the train, but not before the Commissar attempts to disrupt the visit by shouting, "No. No. The train is about to leave," and being contradicted by a defiant conductor from the next car who shouts: "It is alright. You have ten minutes." We board the carriage, leaving an angry Commissar hurling abuse at a fellow comrade.

We manage to squeeze into our coupe. The driver is instructed to open the box, which he does, producing three glasses and a bottle of vodka. He pours drams then slices a cucumber. Chudanov welcomes me to the region, expresses his disappointment that I am unable to stop over for a visit and drinks to my health. The empty glasses are immediately replenished, more cucumber is sliced and passed round. The toasts are on. In eight minutes, the vodka bottle has become a dead soldier.

Chudanov is a charming man. Handsome, of medium height and soft spoken, he gives every appearance of being a troubled man. He is knowledgeable about Canada and genuinely interested in the reason for my visit to Kazakhstan. The possibility of comparative research appeals to him. When he rises to go and I innocently say "*Spaceba, tavarish*" (Thank you, comrade), the reference to "comradeship" clearly surprises and pleases him. He grasps my hand in both of his and becomes emotional.

When our train finally leaves the station, he is standing on the platform with his driver, waving. I deeply regret that it has not been possible to spend time with this scientist. Like Makarov in Moscow, he strikes me to be a man of warmth, with a strong sense of humanity.

We unpack the box and discover a feast fit for a Czar. A huge piece of roast beef, carefully wrapped in paper. Half a dozen hard-boiled eggs, cucumbers, green onions, cheese, fresh bread, a handsome supply of vodka. Mekhlis and I are both touched by the generosity. It is clear that he is well thought of throughout the former USSR. And it speaks well of Canada too.

Ahead, out of the window, lies the Volga but it is not until we begin to cross it that I fully appreciate what a mighty waterway it truly is. The train engineer has reduced speed, probably under "slow orders" and proceeds across the bridge at about the same speed VIA Rail crosses the Victoria, over the St. Lawrence in Montreal. In fact, the Victoria Bridge comes to mind and it is the comparison with the width of the St. Lawrence that is awesome. "*Clickity clack, clickity clack,*" on and on. It seems that we will never get across. Below, river traffic. On the distant shore, to the northeast, Tolyatti, the automobile manufacturing city named after the late leader of the Italian Communist Party. We reach the other side at last. The train picks up speed as it continues its eastward dash across the eastern Russian forest-steppe.

Mekhlis and I sit down to a feast. The roast beef has been stuffed with garlic cloves and marinated. Tender, tasty, tempting both of us to overindulge. Pity those who have to fly.

And so the afternoon and evening continue, with one amusing addition to the growing inventory of anecdotes concerning the Commissar. One of the passengers sharing our carriage is an agricultural extension worker who knows Mekhlis. He happened to be standing by the carriage door when Chudanov approached the Commissar on the Syzran platform and inquired whether the Director of the Institute for Grain Research in Kazakhstan was aboard. The Commissar had replied in the negative. "He is travelling with a Canadian scientist," Chudanov had persisted. "No, no," the Commissar had replied emphatically. There is just a foreigner, with his interpreter." At this point, the extension worker had intervened to correct the Commissar, insisting that Mekhlis was indeed the learned director whom Chudanov was seeking. "He didn't tell me he was a director. How was I to know?" she replied argumentatively. Clearly it had been a mistake to allow the foreigner to flatter her earlier in the morning. Her instincts were correct. Foreigners caused problems.

Friday, June 5

09:00 hrs.: We arrive, after a long, comfortable rest, at a sleepy little town

called Verduch. The station is shaded by ancient trees. Goats roam about, untethered. Several old men sit on the platform benches, silently inspecting the bustle of passengers and train crews on the station platform. The buildings affronting the street behind the station are old and drab. At the far end of the station is a building with water spouts along the wall facing the train. Here passengers used to acquire hot water, in the days before the trains were fitted with a hot water unit in each carriage.

We seem to be and are indeed many miles from Moscow, in another world, with a slower pace and less urban expectations. We have yet to reach the Urals. The village, in fact, is located on the eastern edge of the forest-steppe region which lies between the mountain range and Moscow to the west. A vast country.

Within an hour, we are beginning the gentle climb into the Urals. The mountains offer an attractive and welcome relief from the forest-steppe, draped in pine, the track following the twists and turns of the most favourable terrain.

10:00 hrs.: We arrive at Zlatoust, an industrial city in the middle of the Urals. The marshalling yard beyond the station is enormous, with fifteen tracks. The station is grand and the platforms are crowded with passengers both arriving and departing.

The train route beyond the station skirts a series of huge iron and steel smelters, belching thick, black emissions into the tainted sky. The sun, in an otherwise cloudless sky, struggles in vain to penetrate the smog.

The industrial plant gives every indication of being 1950 in vintage. The railway yards about the smelters are black and dusty. Nobody has bothered to remove the rubble: discarded freight wagons, broken machinery, scattered refuse.

Beyond the smelters, on the hills surrounding the valley, housing estates perch on the edge. The apartments are made of brick, white for the most part. Their appearance compliments the atmosphere about the smelters. I am reminded of the Turcott yards and industrial sites in lower Montreal, before the deindustrialization of my native city in the late 1950s. Grim and grimy.

Slowly the train ascends once again into the Urals. One is reminded more of the Laurentians than the Rocky Mountains. Although higher than the Laurentians, the Urals share their gentle character. Fresh air and the smell of pine. Marvellous.

12:50 hrs.: The train arrives at Chelyabinsk, on the eastern side of the Urals. We are greeted by Alexander Vasilyvitch Vreshnov, one of

Mekhlis's colleagues who has generously answered the call for provisions.

More toasts, brief exchanges of pleasantries, before the delegation is bustled off the train by an irritated Commissar. I suspect that she has already concluded that we now are in possession of enough quantities of food and drink to provision half the carriage. She is not far wrong — marinated roast beef, sausage, horse meat, boiled eggs, bread, dried fish, green onions, radishes, tomatoes and the indispensable cucumbers. Enough vodka to launch a boat. This is the life.

The scenery changes once again, back to the forest-steppe. Fewer trees, however, more open country. Kazakhstan and the endless prairies cannot be far away.

Our afternoon is pleasantly interrupted by a young child, whose curiosity has led him to explore the carriage beyond his parents' compartment. He gradually overcomes his natural shyness and honours us with a visit in our compartment. His sociability is rewarded with the presentation of a Canadian 25¢ piece.

Presently, his father drops by to express his thanks. He joins us for a drink. His name is Nicolai, a resident of a town on the coast, north of Leningrad. Along with his wife and son, he is travelling to Kazakhstan in search of employment.

Our conversation begins with a learned discussion of drink and national customs. He inquires of my opinion concerning Russian beer. I plead "no comment," as I have never sampled any. This deprivation in my life is immediately remedied. Nicolai hastens through the train to the restaurant car, returning with a bottle of Russian beer.

"Not bad," I judge. It is beer, over against lager, and has a pleasant taste. Reminds me of Mexican or Chinese beer. Nicolai is clearly pleased and flattered by the international comparison. Vodka, after all, is what Russia is justifiably famous for.

We are joined by Nicolai's wife Svetlana, a young, shy, attractive woman. The conversation turns to the purpose of their journey: the search for alternative employment.

Svetlana is not as sanguine about a move as her husband clearly is. He presently holds a managerial position and is confident he can find work in "sales." It is a calling, I suspect, that he would be good at.

Both have come to dislike the cold, damp, coastal climate north of Leningrad. They have come to believe that Kazakhstan is an attractive alternative.

I ask whether geographic and occupational mobility are common in the republics that used to comprise the USSR. They answer "yes and no."

During the Stalin era, forced geographic and occupational mobility was common. Since Gorbachev came to power, voluntary mobility has become a realistic option. They acknowledge, however, that they know of few who have exercised this new "freedom."

Our discourse is suddenly interrupted by the Commissar. Why, she demands rudely, are Svetlana and Nicolai not occupying their own compartment. Although she does not say so, the implication is clear. Visiting with foreigners in her carriage is against her rules.

Nicolai replies for his wife and himself. The Commissar is invited to mind her own business. His tone of voice is neither angry, nor rude. Just firm. Alas, it solicits a lecture from the Commissar.

Standing in the entrance to our compartment, entrapping the four of us in our cell, Conductress Clara recounts the tale of the lamentable German, who was parted from his clothes one unfortunate evening while en route to Moscow from Tselinograd. The incident caused great discomfort. The police became involved. Railway inspectors asked questions. Clara was grilled, and required to fill out forms, many forms. This was inconvenient and annoying, she reported. The incident was now part of her employment record, she added. What the German traveller thought about the whole affair she did not say. In fact, it was clear that the German, like all foreigners, was an invitation to antisocial elements to practice their craft and threaten and otherwise upset the orderly routine of honest railway workers.

Indeed, Nicolai and Svetlana were given to understand that the Commissar has had her eye on them; that the child had been only a ruse to gain entrance to our compartment.

To all this Nicolai and Svetlana listened in patient silence. When the Commissar is through, Nicolai gives of his opinion that Clara is a foolish old woman. His tone of voice is "matter of fact" and the Commissar accepts the insult in the spirit in which it is given. We are left to resume our conversation, safe in the knowledge that the five of us are now under surveillance.

18:00 hrs.: The train arrives at Kustinay, about 270 kilometres southeast of Chelyabinsk. We are met by Valentin Ivanovitch Deuretchivsky, the last of Mekhlis's colleagues who has agreed to rescue us from starvation and dehydration. Another large, packed box, more toasts and barely enough room to move about it.

Spirited farewells are exchanged and the train departs, with the Commissar shaking her head in disbelief. Why cannot foreigners travel by plane, like most sensible Russian officials, she must be thinking.

Mekhlis and I take counsel. We can't possibly do justice to the food

and drink we now have in hand. I propose that we invite other passengers in our carriage and those of the train crew we have met to join us for a meal. Mekhlis agrees and disappears down the companionway to issue invitations.

He returns shortly, alone. We wait for a reasonable interval. No one shows up. I suggest that Mekhlis reapproach the prospective guests. He does so, this time with results. One by one our compartment fills with shy, expectant passengers. Finally our ally, the young conductor from the adjoining carriage, arrives with Clara in tow.

He chooses to stand by the door, in deference to the other passengers. Not the Commissar. Clara barges in, shoves me aside, fetches a comfortable seat on the lower berth and proceeds to stuff herself with abandon. "*Horoshoh*" (Good), she announces after several large mouthfuls and warms us all up with a broad grin.

Good food, fine drink, the best of companions, all together as the train gathers speed on its way to Kazakhstan.

Saturday, June 6

08:00 hrs.: Awake and get dressed. We discover that we are the only remaining passengers in our carriage. The Commissar, aided by an assistant, is busy stripping the abandoned compartments of their towels and bed linen, making sure no blankets have been stolen. For the first time on the trip, I am given a pleasant response when I greet her with a cheery "*Dobra Utra*" (Good Morning).

We arrive in Tselinograd, about one hour late. The square in front of the station is huge, with cars and buses parked at random. The pavement is not in good repair. The weather is overcast. It fits in with the station square architecture. Cement buildings, on the square, so to speak. A Spartan design, deadened with ubiquitous cement slabs.

Before detraining, I make a point of thanking the Commissar for her services. I allow that she is a credit to the railway company. She replies smartly that she is merely doing her duty, adding that she will not accept a gratuity of any kind. Mekhlis and I are happy to accede to her wishes.

As we alight, our young conductor friend from the adjoining carriage greets us and removes from his lapel a pin, which he graciously presents to me. We shake hands and agree that Gordie Howe and Vladimir Tretiak are among the best of hockey players.

We are greeted by Mekhlis's chauffeur, Franz Ivanovitch Zaremba, a pleasant young man with dark, reddish hair. He eagerly gives us a hand with our baggage; a welcome assist as we now have acquired more pieces than can be reasonably managed by two. Most of it, of course, is unconsumed food and drink.

We stow our gear in the Institute's car; a modern, Russian four-door job. Quite comfortable and roomy. We make a few stops in the city, before heading for Shortandy, a town some seventy kilometres north of the city where the Institute and experimental farm are located.

The city streets are broad by North American standards, lined with trees and four-storey apartment buildings. The housing estates are made of brick and have a tatty appearance. Although this is a new city, it has a jaded appearance. For instance, one could clean up or whitewash the brick walls of the apartment buildings. This has not been done. The windows of the apartments appear to be framed in wood — unpainted wood. The doorways to the apartments are narrow, many doors are unpainted and unhinged, uninviting. There is space about the buildings for grass, hedges, flowers, artistic fences. Instead, the buildings are graced with dirt, weeds, refuse. There are trees about, to be sure, but they have a neglected look, in some instances, a defiant look. "I will grow and bloom here," they seem to be saying, "despite your indifference and neglect." Then the windows. It is the glass, of course. Unwashed. Uncared for. No sparkle. No brilliant reflections, even beneath an overcast sky. Memories of the New Town in Edinburgh, where mist and cloud could never cast a shadow on the many polished windows.

The city, once a town by the name of Akmolinsk, is a creature of Khrushchev's virgin-land policy. In fact, it was Khruschchev who insisted on renaming the town "Tselinograd," meaning "city of the virgin land." The decision was widely applauded by the unsuspecting local Communist Party and civic officials, I am told. Life was simpler then. The Soviet leadership knew what the people wanted and the local workers and peasants had the good sense to express, at least in public, their appreciation of this political reality.

But not always without a struggle. When in the 1950s the Soviet government first proposed to convert the prairie region of northern Kazakhstan from grazing to wheat production, the Kazakhstan Communist Party and republican government initially opposed the proposal. However, they were both eventually overruled by Moscow. The horse-herding communities of Kazakhs were cleared off the land and the prairie was put to the plow.[5]

Many Kazakhs, I am told, chose not to farm, for cultural, if not political reasons. It became necessary to bring in young men and women who were

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5 See G. Hosking, *The First Socialist Society: A History of the Soviet Union From Within* (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1985); T.W. Cleary, "The Virgin Lands," *Survey* 56 (1965); R. Medvedev, *Krushchev: A Biography* (New York: Doubleday, 1983).

attracted to or could be persuaded to man the state and collective farms that were being organized. They came from many parts of the Union: principally Russia, the Ukraine, Byelorussia and German settlements along the Volga.

Today, these migrants make up 60 percent of the Kazakhstan Republic's population. The remaining 40 percent are of Kazakh ancestry, and of these only half speak Kazakh as well as Russian.[6]

The clearing of the Kazakhs from the prairies and the creation of a wheat economy reminds one of the aborginal peoples who once claimed the Canadian prairies as their own and were in turn cleared off in favour of the creation of a wheat economy. The comparison is striking.

We leave Tselinograd behind and head north on a two-lane highway. There is little verge to speak of. The highway is in need of repair. Franz is a skillful driver and he navigates potholes with assurance.

One is immediately arrested by the surrounding countryside. It could be Saskatchewan. Flat, endless prairie as far as the eye can see. A great circle of sky. There is only one difference. There are no farm buildings, either abandoned or occupied. And no grain elevators on the horizon. Just wheat, as far as the eye can see. The buildings, the farm implements and farm workers are all located in towns or villages, some fifty to seventy kilometres apart. As we drive north, it is difficult to believe that the former Soviet Union had to import wheat from North America and Australia. By Saskatchewan standards, we are heading through wealthy, productive country — vast, rolling, treeless country. All beneath a great circle of sky. All caressed by a cool and unforgiving wind. A dry wind, with a memorable and unmistakable scent. I forget that I am halfway across the world, in a foreign land. One feels at home.

12:00 hrs.: We reach Shortandy — a small town, shaded by a rich abundance of trees. Most of the streets are paved but the grass verges that separate the sidewalks from the road have been allowed to revert to weeds. No one, it seems, bothers to cut the grass and weed the lawns.

The apartments are of two storeys, comparable to our duplexes. Each has a garden patch and all of them are well attended. Vegetables, not flowers and appearance, are the priority in this community.

I am lodged in a small residence or hostel, which belongs to the Institute. It is a two-storey affair, with two beds to a room. On the main

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6 See L. Schwartz, "USSR Nationality Distribution by Republic, 1979-1989," *Soviet Geography* 32, no. 4 (April 1991).

floor is a large, narrow dining room. There is one bathroom on the second floor, with wash basin, bath tub and toilet. All is neat and clean.

I am to be the only resident. After visiting his home, which is next door, Mekhlis joins me for lunch. Soup, ground beef patties and potatoes, bread, tea and the one item around which every Soviet meal is organized: the cucumber. Very pleasant, but I make a note of the fact that people in this part of the world are partial to meat fat in their diet. The soup and the beef patties gave evidence of this culinary preference.

15:00 hrs.: Mekhlis and I head across and down the street for a meeting at the Grain Research Institute. It is housed in a large, four-storey rectangular building, facing onto a broad courtyard. There is the hint of splendour about the place. The architecture is simple, favouring straight lines. The courtyard is well treed. But it is the little things — the absence of a trim, green lawn, flower beds well tended, a fresh spot of good paint.

We ascend to the second floor and proceed to Mekhlis's office. Awaiting us are the two deputy directors of the Institute, the manager of the experimental farm, and the heads of a number of research sections. Everyone is slightly formal, which takes me somewhat by surprise.

Following introductions, we proceed down the corridor to a brightly designed exhibition hall. One by one, the heads of the research sections provide a resumé of the work and activities of their units. The focus is on crop rotations, field-cropping practices, moisture control, weed control, soil fertility, mechanization, livestock breeding.

As often as not, these scientists make reference to Saskatchewan and to the research work of the Canada Agriculture Research Station at Swift Current. I am impressed with their knowledge of prairie agriculture and their familiarity with research reports published in English.

There is also an evident pride in their work. A humorous misunderstanding arises. This afternoon session was conceived by my Kazakhstan hosts as a formal gesture, a welcome and an introduction to the work of the Institute. But when I respond to their gesture by asking questions, they soon forget the purpose of the session and the fact that this is an afternoon holiday. Each section head replies with eagerness and with more detail than was thought necessary by those colleagues who are awaiting a chance to have a go at me. An hour soon begins to stretch into two.

It is a good session and an interesting group to meet. I guess that the two deputy directors are approaching retirement. The remainder are between 40 and 50 years of age; a mixture of Volga Germans, Ukrainians, Russians, Byelorussians and Kazakhs. Clearly all united in a common enthusiasm for their work.

One item of observation bears recording. There is clearly a division of

labour at the Institute. I want to know if it creates artificial barriers between the research units. For example, were the engineers working on tillage implements in touch with biologists studying weed control? The scientists to whom I put the question immediately recognize its significance. They acknowledge that interdisciplinary cooperation is not well developed, a luxury they can less and less afford. Memories of home.

Following the session, Mekhlis takes me on a walking tour of the village. The school and community hall are located in the centre, with the shops across the village square. There is a plan to the whole thing, but again, something is missing. The town hall is large and functional but there is a rough quality to the workmanship and materials that went into it.

The village square is strategically located, but there is an absence of lawns and flowers. The shop, like the ones I visited in Moscow, is a shower. A large, cold, undecorated room, unwashed windows; a paucity of provisions. A basket of small, malformed and rotting potatoes, for example, that any self-respecting hog would turn away from. Somehow, the white smocks on the clerks left them looking more sloppy than they were. Women crowd about the door, poorly dressed. All eyes on the foreigner. Muffled conversations when Mekhlis and I pass by.

A change in the weather. Clouds, wind, a drop in temperature, then rain. We take refuge in Mekhlis's house, a two-storey duplex which compares favourably with Canadian accommodation.

Mekhlis's wife, Raisa, comes from Byelorussia, and like many in the village works at the Institute. A slim, attractive woman. Very shy. We are joined by the wife of one of the Institute's deputy directors — O.S. Chorikov; a lively, good-humoured women with an unmistakable eye for mischief.

We sit down to a marvellous meal. An excellent soup, followed by dumplings containing beef and pork. Huge helpings. Ample vodka, cucumbers and toasts.

Following the main course, Mekhlis and I retire for a walk, a brief stroll, as it turns out, as the weather forces us to return home. We meet Raisa in the garden, where she is working against the wind to cover the plants. She is joined by Mekhlis and for a good twenty minutes the evening festivities are postponed while the vegetable garden is tended to. This is not a hobby garden. It is, as I will learn, a necessity.

Dessert is served and conversation resumed. Poor Mekhlis. He is both kind and considerate. Everything must be translated, leaving him little time to himself. He never complains and is always attentive. He commands five languages: Kazakh, Russian, Ukrainian, German and English. He is giving French a chance. And the rednecks in French- and English-

speaking Canada complain about learning the other's language. How pathetic. How embarrassing.

I innocently raise the issue of gardens and remark that most people seem to have one. "Of course," my hosts reply, "you cannot survive without one." I ask for an explanation and I am given a lesson in prices, Soviet style.

In January of this year, I am told, eggs sold at 1 ruble and 20 kopecs for ten. Now they cost 20 rubles for ten. Bread has gone from 24 kopecs to 2 rubles a loaf; sugar from 80 kopecs a kilogram to 7 rubles; meat from 1 ruble and 70 kopecs a kilogram to 46 rubles. Vodka has risen from 9 rubles and 20 kopecs a half litre to 90 rubles, or 150 rubles if you purchase it in Moscow. Over the past six months, children's clothing has risen by a factor of thirty. Rent has gone from 16 rubles a month to 40. During the same period, wages have risen by a factor of three. At the Institute, the scientists and workers have not been paid for the last three months. Why? There is a shortage of rubles in circulation. How did people survive, I inquired. They resorted to their savings, my hosts replied.[7]

Vegetables are out of the question; you grow your own. Municipal authorities have been forced to provide public land for this purpose to their citizens. In Moscow alone, 80 percent of the population is thought to have a country *dacha* for the purpose of this gardening enterprise.

Who is responsible for this state of affairs, I ask. Yeltsin, the political leadership, the Mafia, I am told. Nazerbayev, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, seems to escape blame. I am told that Kazakhstan is not as bad as Russia. The problem is, Russia dominates the economies of all

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7 A report from the Russian State Statistics Committee, published in the February 14, 1992 edition of *Izvestia*, stated that real pay (i.e., purchasing power) fell by 10 percent over the year and national income fell by 11 percent. The consumer price index in the fourth quarter of 1991 was 128 percent (the ratio of December's prices to September's). See *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 44, no. 7 (1992). According to the Central Economic Research Institute of the Russian Federation Ministry of Economics, the population can be classified in terms of four income groups. The first group earns less than 3,500 rubles per month and accounts for 35-37 percent of the population. It includes members of the intelligentsia, blue-collar workers, agricultural workers, scholars, scientists and cultural artists. This wage is not sufficient to cover the basic costs of living. The second group earns between 3,500 and 10,000 rubles per month and accounts for 33-35 percent of the labour force. In this group, 78-80 percent of income is spent on food. The group includes engineers, technical personnel, scholars and scientists employed in commercial ventures, and some blue-collar workers in the service sector. The third group earns between 10,000 and 45,000 rubles per month, accounts for 18-20 percent of the wage earners and includes employees in the private sector. The fourth group earns over 45,000 rubles per month, accounts for 13-15 percent of all wage earners, and includes people employed in the state power structure. See *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 44, no. 37 (1992).

the former republics of the USSR. Russian policies, therefore, have consequences beyond the federation's borders.

When I invoke Lenin's favourite question — *Chto delaet?* (What is to be done?) — I am told that no one knows what to do. There is a sense of despair, deepened with resignation. The humour of the earlier part of the evening does not return. For my part, I take my leave, sober and troubled.

Sunday, June 7

09:00 hrs.: Franz arrives with the car and Mekhlis and I join him for a scheduled day-long tour of the northern prairie of Kazakhstan. We rejoin the highway east of the village and drive north.

The weather is inclement — cold, windy, overcast, occasional spots of rain. The land is flat and it appears that the spring seeding is complete. As we drive farther north, we leave the flat prairie for what we would call parkland: rolling prairie with bluffs of trees and water ponds. There is plenty of waterfowl about.

We pass several herds of cattle, all tended by a herdsman mounted and riding a horse. There are no fences and one of the herdsman's responsibilities is to keep the livestock together. I notice one herdsman wearing a pancho and a broad, brim hat. He is carrying a long, thin stick with a leather whip on the end. A vision of rural Mexico?

We presently come to an elevation in the land, which is forested, then out again onto the empty steppe. Such rich and varying contrasts in landscape and topography. Just like Saskatchewan, on the other side of the globe.

About 100 kilometres north of Tselinograd, we approach a white car, parked on the side of the road. The rear windows are curtained. We stop and I am introduced to the agricultural director of the local *raon* or district, an agronomist by profession and Ukrainian by birth. We change cars and continue north. Franz follows on behind, bereft of passengers.

Presently, we approach a third car parked by the road, black with white curtains. We stop and I am introduced to Erkesh Bayakhmetov, deputy chairman of the Kokchetav Regional Administration (*oblast*) and chairman of the Kokchetav Agricultural Department. A large stocky man of Kazakh ancestry, he is clearly troubled this morning. There was a frost last night and there has been crop damage. He takes council with Mekhlis, leaving the rest of us standing about in the morning cold. Then, with a grin and no warning, he orders us into the cars and off we dash for the city of Kokchetav. No one is left to doubt as to who is in charge of this three-car convoy. I am tempted to think that I may be more important than I am. If Commissar Clara could see us now.

12:00 hrs.: We arrive at Kokchetav and proceed to the city hall. Although this is Sunday, Bayakhmetov's presence results in all hands on deck. Locked doors are smartly opened and we arrive in the city administrator's office just before he does.

His name is Gennady Andreevitch Fedorov, an engineer whose career has spanned the construction of the second trans-Siberian railroad and a sanitorium in the Borovoy district within the *oblast*. He is a large, jovial, engaging man.

We enter into a conversation about the local municipal economy. State enterprises are being turned over to the workers in the form of co-operatives. The transition is proving difficult and painful.[8]

Productivity in some instances is increasing; initial results are encouraging. But layoffs have been necessary. This has placed a welfare burden on the community. Taxes have been increased as a result. They require more investment. Fedorov expresses an interest in establishing a brewery. The spring water in the *oblast* is of fine quality. But they lack capital and expertise.

I make mention of the story concerning the Great Western Brewing Company in Saskatoon. Fedorov's face lights up. But, before we can pursue the matter, Bayakhmetov orders the entourage to the cars. A decisive and impatient man, this one. Clearly used to command. (I learn later that he was a rising star in the Communist Party.)

We are headed, I learn, to a resort area known as Borovoy, a forested elevation on the prairie dotted with spring-fed lakes and streams. It turns out to be the Cypress Hills of Kazakhstan.

There is a gate and a guard on duty at the entrance to the resort, a 70,000-square-kilometre state park. Our driver blows his horn, but the guard does not respond, forcing the convey to stop. The city administrator shouts an order and the barrier is raised. Fedorov is amused that he is not recognized by the young man. Bayakhmetov displays a less-charitable reaction.

Borovoy is a state park, located on an elevation that rises above the surrounding plain. In ancient times it offered a refuge to the semi-nomadic Kazakh tribes. In a meadow, closed in by hills and located in the

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8 For example, the February 11 edition of *Izvestia* carried a report on a decree issued by Kazakhstan President Nursultan Nazarbayev, ordering the conversion of state agricultural enterprises to collective or joint-stock enterprises, to be owned and controlled by the employees. Shares in such enterprises are to be distributed on the basis of the employee's length of service and labour contribution. See *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 44, no. 6 (1992).

centre of the park is a cairn, erected by officials to commemorate an historic site where Kazakh nomads took refuge from a hostile world.

We drive around the park on a narrow paved road that winds around hills, marvellous rock formations (the likes of which I have never seen), beneath a thick forest of pines. The aroma is breathtaking and complements the many crystal clear, spring-fed lakes.

We pass several sanatoria, one of which remains unfinished and unoccupied. It belongs to a trade union. Construction began seven years ago, but the union could not raise additional capital to complete the project.

The city administrator informs me that park development has become problematic. There are issues of environmental and public control. There is the lack of investment capital, both for the construction of sanatoria and lodges, and the maintenance and upgrading of infrastructure.

Until now, state ministries and trade unions were permitted to construct sanatoria in the park. Now the door has been opened ever so slightly to private investment and entrepreneurship. We will have the opportunity to inspect the results of both.

The first sanatorium we visit was built by Fedorov. It is a long, rectangular building, with neat straight lines, situated on the banks of a spring-fed lake. The interior foyer and corridors are grand, without being intimidating. The sanitorium is staffed with a full range of medical personnel. Mekhlis mentions that he has stayed here often, with beneficial results.

I am impressed with the building and the range of services it offers to the public. Fedorov is visibly pleased. Here is a man who likes to build, and takes pride in his work.

Our second stop is at a wooden chalet, built deep in the forest. It is a private venture and it is here that we take our lunch. We are escorted up a steep, narrow staircase to an upper room. A table has been set with fresh linen, beautiful china, and a tempting assortment of *hors d'oeuvres*. To my relief, I spy a plate of sliced cucumber amidst the other offerings. The ceiling is low. The room gives off a pleasant scent of pine. A waiter, neatly dressed, arrives with vodka. I am reminded of a scene from the movie *The Brothers Karamazov*.

The meal we are about to share is referred to as a lunch. In fact, it is a sumptuous feast. There are five of us. In addition to Mekhlis and myself, there are Bayakhmetov, who acts as host, Fedorov and the agriculture director of one of the *raons* within the *oblast*.

We begin with soup, followed by stuffed peppers, followed by a meat dish and salads. Bayakhmetov insists that we consume far more than is good for our health. What can one do? He is generous and hospitable to a

fault. To reject his entreaty to have but one more stuffed pepper (the sixth) will give offence. Onwards and upwards, I decide. If this meal proves to be my last, it will be said that I died in good company. And they are hearty company, these jovial administrators and former members of the Communist Party.

No one is in a hurry. Toasts abound, to nationalism and the new Kazakhstan, to enterprise and new ways. But there lingers a measure of uncertainty and unease behind the confident declarations about the future. Do I detect an absence of enthusiasm among my Russian and Ukrainian hosts when the deputy chairman of the *oblast* offers a fervent, nationalist toast? Enterprise and new ways, by all means, but how? In conversation, it becomes clear that none of my hosts is satisfied with the role presently being played by the state bank. The World Bank is viewed with suspicion. We talk about collective versus private methods of production. I allow that the so-called market economy, at least in Canada, enjoys many collective features of a social character. My hosts pick up on this and, to my surprise, the views I express on the nature and character of capitalism in Canada are well received. Fedorov observes that Soviet engineering is unreliable. The consistent high standards evident in Canadian industrial products are not achieved. There is an ambivalence here.

Two hours have elapsed. Food, drink and conversation have dulled our sensibilities. Fedorov rises from his place and proposes a toast to celebrate our departure. Everything — the food, drink, conversation, companionship — has been memorable. I think we all sense that it is a shame to break up the party. But the deputy director of the *oblast* is, as I have recorded, an impatient man, with things to do.

Our chauffeurs are waiting patiently by the cars, unfed and unwatered. Corrective measures are agreed to and our party drives off in the direction of another lake, on the shores of which is another private restaurant, with a difference.

The rustic motif of the first has given way to what the locals must believe to be modern decor, *à la* Hollywood nightclub. High-backed booths, chrome, huge mirrors, soft blue lights. My hosts are quite proud of the achievement and gladly show me about while our chauffeurs seek and are given nourishment.

I acknowledge that I am impressed, even if the style leaves me cold. The only pleasant aspect to the decor is the great window, offering an uninterrupted view of the lake and the green hills beyond. As for the public toilet, it consists of a hole in the floor. The synthesis of two cultures: vulgar American and primitive Kazakh? I say primitive. At least one is spared chrome in the toilet and, if you hold your nose, the updraft on a hot day does produce a cooling effect.

16:30 hrs.: Our convoy returns to Kokchetav. Once again, we are challenged at the entrance barrier, to the evident frustration of the city manager and displeasure of the deputy chairman of the *oblast*.

We skirt the city and drive to a state farm close by. The terrain is very much of the forest-steppe variety that stretches east from Moscow to the Urals.

Although it is Sunday afternoon and a holiday, we are met outside the administrative offices of the farm by the director, an older, dignified man, neatly turned out in a light grey suit. His name is Borgul. He has a kind, smooth face. His hair is thick, silvery and wavy.

Introductions are made and to my surprise, he leads our party to a large memorial, in the square in front of the administrative offices. Here are inscribed the names of the local men and women who gave their lives in the 1917 revolution, the civil war that followed, and World War II. We linger, as I believe Borgul intended we should.

His office is on the second floor of the farm's administrative building; another three-storey, rectangular affair made out of brick. The interior corridors are well worn. The decor is functional, austere. Behind the director's desk, a large picture of Lenin keeps a watchful eye on the room.

The impatient deputy chairman of the *oblast* takes advantage of the office to make several phone calls. The state of the crop is very much on his mind. I, in turn, am politely invited to direct any questions I might have to the farm's director. We have a good exchange.

The farm occupies 12,000 hectares, half of which is either uncultivated or in forest. The principal commodity is potatoes, with some grain, millet and livestock, primarily for internal consumption. There are 11,000 residents in the village.

The land is owned by the state. Although the Republic has passed a law making family farming legal, only three families in the village have expressed a wish to go it alone. For one thing, the lack of arable land in the region is a constraint. For another, most farm workers are used to working together for adequate wages, over a relatively short working day (e.g., eight hours), on a regular basis.

There are, however, problems. There is a good demand for potatoes in both the Republic and in the former USSR. This state farm needs to find ways to improve quantity and quality of production.

They have undertaken several trials with a Manitoba variety of potato, with promising results. They need to become involved in value-added activity, such as processing. Again, Borgul was of the view that Manitoba might offer useful answers. He suggests that the potato industry in Canada was in advance of that found in Kazakhstan. He makes several

references to Manitoba, and to production and processing in Atlantic Canada.

He acknowledges that his farm experienced storage problems. Again, there is a willingness to consider the practices of other nations and regions; in this case Manitoba and the Ukraine. He also makes mention of a joint venture with potato producers at Stavropol — Gorbachev's old stamping ground — but he does not elaborate.

He states with some pride that young men and women in the village wish to remain; that only 10 percent choose to leave. Again, another problem. Borgul anticipates that improvements in productivity will render agriculture less labour-intensive. Alternative economic activity must be developed. He mentions clothing and shoe making. I inquire about wood products but he shakes his head sadly. The timber in the region, while plentiful, is not of good quality.

It is a revealing conversation. There is nothing boastful about this veteran comrade. Indeed, there are few references to mind-numbing statistics, calculated to demonstrate prowess in production. To the contrary, there is an easy candour in acknowledging and identifying problems.

It is evident that this state farm director is not sitting on any laurels. He is actively searching for answers, open to suggestions from western nations such as Canada. But on one thing he is firm. He is committed to socialist solutions; that is solutions which require cooperation, sharing, and collective ownership.

Sadly, time does not permit an exchange of views on these issues. I sense that the director has warmed to the discussion and wishes to pursue matters. But Bayakhmetov is inspecting his watch. It is a signal to depart. In taking our leave, I express to Director Borgul the hope that we will meet again. I can tell by his handshake that it is a hope he shares.

Our convoy speeds off and heads south. The weather remains overcast, with strong winds and the ever-present threat of rain. Strange conditions for June, both here and in Saskatchewan.

18:00 hrs.: We arrive at another state farm, or more precisely, at the residence of the director of a state farm; one located on the open prairie and devoted to grain production. In the hours ahead, I will discover little about this farm, all because of Kazakh custom.

The director — Kunanbaev by name — is a thin, wiry man of Kazakh origin. His home has the appearance of a prairie ranch house, with a flat roof. It is fenced off, with corrals attached to one side. The house is of wooden construction.

We enter a large porch, similar to those attached to the entrances to

prairie farm homes in Canada. It is meant as a place to remove field boots and gear. This one is roomy and well swept.

The director's wife, a shy, retiring woman of middle age, greets us at the entrance to the principal hallway of the house, then disappears. I suspect this is going to be an evening of "gentlemen only," if I can describe the six of us thus.

We are taken into a large, rectangular living room, with a small anteroom off one side. The main part of the outside wall is windowed, offering a view of the corrals and sloping steppe beyond.

In the middle of the room is a long dining table, set for seven — a place at one end and three settings on either side. The china is extremely attractive, of Kazakh design. There are dishes of pickles, *hors d'oeuvres* and the ever-welcome cucumber. Each setting includes a tiny glass for shots of vodka. Each guest has been provided with a large, white linen napkin. The table can be summed up in one phrase: a work of art.

The rest of the room is plainly furnished. There is a magnificent tapestry or carpet on one wall. The deputy chairman of the *oblast* switches on the TV. This may be Kunanbaev's home but Bayakhmetov is still in charge.

We wash up, regather, and take our places about the dining table. I am given the place of honour — at the head of the table.

The director of the farm reappears, carrying a giant platter of steaming hunks of mutton. It looks like an entire sheep and indeed it is. On top of the steaming meat rests the poor beast's head, singed of hair and steaming too.

I marvel at the sight and commit a *faux pas*. Thirsty, I partake of the vodka placed before me. Bayakhmetov, who is sitting to my left, gives me a look of disapproval. One never drinks in Kazakhstan, or the former USSR for that matter, without proposing a toast and consuming a morsel of food. To drink without eating represents an abuse of alcohol. Needless to add, most Russians and Kazakhs I have met so far never stop eating.

The unintentional breach of etiquette, however, saves the day. My glass is no sooner replenished when the master of the house removes the sheep's head to a smaller platter and sets both down in front of me. "The delicacy, the best part, for the guest of honour," he announces proudly. As I ponder, with trepidation, what might follow, the director returns to his place and proceeds to carve up the hunks of mutton for his guests.

The meal, I am now told, is both an ancient Kazakh delicacy and custom. The delicacy, of course, is a sheep, skinned and stewed in an huge pot for at least seven hours. The host is required to carve the carcass for his guests, reserving the head for the guest of honour. The meal and

the custom go by the Kazakh name of *"beshbarmach,"* a reference to the practice of using the five fingers of one's hand in place of cutlery.

All eyes now turn on me, including two baleful ones belonging to the sheep. The rest are bright and merry, with a hint of anticipation.

Bayakhmetov takes charge. It is the custom, I learn to my horror, that the head is reserved, in the first instance, for the guest of honour alone. However, the guest of honour, as an act of generosity, may choose to share part of the delicacy with the others.

I turn to my right and look to Mekhlis for assistance. None is forthcoming. Right. "Onwards and upwards, Canada." I slice off one of the sheep's ears and graciously present the leathery object to the colleague who got me into this mess.

He accepts and proceeds to consume it with evident pleasure. "Right," I say to myself, "attack to the left." The other ear for Bayakhmetov. He wolfs it down, with the greatest satisfaction.

What is to be done? I wonder if Lenin was spared this honour. Bayakhmetov to the rescue. I am not fulfilling my social obligations with the speed expected. He offers to assist the honoured foreigner, with my permission, of course.

Resigned, I pass him the carving knife and immediately realize the error in doing so. Before one can blink, he has popped out one of the sheep's eyes, for my benefit.

I have always observed the ancient Scottish custom of never eating on an empty stomach. The glass of vodka of just moments ago is still warming and greasing the digestive track. In goes the eye. A couple of bites and down the hatch.

Most agreeable, I beam and lie at the same time. A chorus of approving cheers. To my great relief, Bayakhmetov proposes a toast, complimenting the foreigner in observing and honouring Kazakh customs.

There really is only one hitch. When we have devoured the head, Bayakhmetov fills up my plate with mutton proper, much of which is still attached to large portions of boiled fat. I draw the line and explain that the consumption of fat is injurious to my heart. The news is greeted with sympathy and I am permitted to confine the rest of the meal to less fatty substance.

Toast, of course, follows toast. And to vodka is added mare's milk, fermented, of course. It has a sour taste, but not at all unpleasant. I drink a glass, then ask for another. The Kazakh hosts are visibly pleased but the Russians present share other thoughts. They are not elated when Bayakhmetov boasts that soon Kazakhstan will have its own flag.

We eventually break from the main meal, leave the table and stretch. I

notice a piano in the anteroom and Mekhlis persuades me to play. The vodka ensures a generous reception, if not a fine performance. The male entourage is now joined by two young women, daughters of the house as it turns out.

The oldest is clearly enchanted by the music and when I learn that she too plays, I persuade her to take my place. We sit around, to the music of Bach and Beethoven, in the middle of the northern plains of Kazakhstan. Europe and Asia coming together, on a cool evening on the windswept steppe. It is good to be alive.

We regather round the table and are served bread rolls and soup. The soup is made from the broth in which the late lamented sheep stewed for hours. To my surprise it is neither greasy nor strong in taste. Quite refreshing, and served in the Chinese style, at the end of the meal.

After an interval of light conversation, we prepare to leave. The director's family gathers to bid farewell. His daughter, Aijan, who played the piano for us, signs my notebook and adds in Russian: "I like good music, like you."

Our convoy leaves the director's yard and halts about two kilometres away, where the farm road meets the main north-south highway.

We exchange farewells. Bayakhmetov adds, "Until we meet again, in Saskatchewan." One of the chauffeurs assists another in topping up the petrol, from a gerry can carried in the trunk of his vehicle. The wind has died down. A setting sun peaks through a break in the clouds. We go to our respective cars and drive off in all directions.

Enough conversation for the moment. Must give Mekhlis a break. Besides, I need to think. My mind is swarming with information, impressions, hunches, questions. I can't get a handle on the whole thing.

For example, Fedorov, the city administrator at Kokchetav, is clearly a senior civil servant of experience. He appears to be on top of things. The conversion of state enterprises to worker-owned and controlled business appears to be going well, resulting in increased productivity and standard of living for those remaining in the factory's work force.

But one of the consequences of the transition has been a rise in unemployment. The temporary solution? An increase in graduated taxes on individuals and economic enterprises to tide the unemployed over. What then? If Fedorov is to be believed, and I sense that he is, the city and the surrounding region will have to create new economic opportunities. This they appear to be doing. Fedorov wants to build a brewery, increase agricultural processing, and expand the tourist trade at Borovoy.

However, they lack capital, expertise, and a willingness in the community to take risks. There is a shortage of bank notes. Kazakhstan intends

to address this problem by issuing its own, as a complement to the ruble. No one knows what the result will be. One senses that Fedorov feels this is but another price to pay for the break up of the USSR.

And what about the lack of expertise? I can't figure this one out. Here is a former nation that produced leading scientists in nuclear and quantum physics, engineers who could put the Americans, British and Germans in their place, musicians, artists and athletes who could compete and compare with the best. Why, suddenly, this claim concerning the absence of expertise? And why this admission of poor workmanship, poor craftsmanship?

There is another matter. Claims of the past to the contrary, the USSR was a modern nation state in which Russian language and culture was at least *primus inter pares*, if not more.

I noticed during the day that expressions of Kazakh nationalism did not always sit well with individuals of Russian, German or Ukrainian ancestry. Put another way, here is a republic, named after a national group, 50 percent of whom could not, along with 60 percent of the total population, speak Kazakh.

An hour has passed and I decide to broach the "national question" with Franz, our chauffeur. His story is an interesting one. His background is Polish. His parents were transported to Kazakhstan in the 1930s from the west and confined to the village in which they were relocated. They were peasants and their forced relocation was part of Stalin's plan to reorganize agricultural production and break the back of *kulaks* (land-owning, family farmers who hired seasonal workers). There was much suffering, yet Franz is strangely matter-of-fact about the whole affair. It is in the past, he says. It was Stalin. But how to judge, he adds.

Franz was born in Kazakhstan and is confident of his roots. He is at home on the steppe. There is no hint in our conversation that ethnicity is a matter of consequence. It is the falling standard of living he is concerned with. But even here, he offers an invidious comparison with the large urban centres, including Moscow. He and his family have a *dacha* outside of Tselinograd, with a large, productive garden. In addition, he confides with pride, he owns a pig, tended by his retired father. Franz is clearly a man of means.

The passing countryside creates a different impression from the one formed this morning. As always on the prairies, nature presents a different side at different times of the day. The sun is setting. We could be driving west of Regina on the Trans-Canada Highway. The same vista on the other side of the globe.

In the distance we see grain terminals, located in a village. They have a capacity of 150,000 to 200,000 tonnes. The average field on the surrounding

state farm is two kilometres square. The fields on either side of the highway are covered by fresh, green spring wheat. They are neat, uniform, orderly. A sign of good workmanship.

We approach a cluster of road signs on the right-hand side of the highway. Franz does not slow down. I strain my eyes to decipher the Cyrillic letters. Suddenly, I notice that one of the signs is in English, indicating the distance to Tselinograd.

Moscow is one thing. Here we are in the middle of central Asia. I ask Mekhlis the meaning of this. "Ah," he replies evasively, "English is an international language." "For farm workers and peasants?" I inquire. A satisfactory answer is not forthcoming. Right, I say to myself. The Yankees are coming, the Yankees are coming.

Monday, June 8

09:30 hrs.: Following breakfast and a stroll in the fresh morning air, Mekhlis and I walk over to the Institute for Grain Research to attend a scheduled meeting of scientists concerning the CPRC's proposal to consider a joint, comparative study of soil conservation policies and practices.

We assemble in a large lecture theatre, the kind I recall from my days as an undergraduate student at McGill. The theatre is sloped, with seats arranged in ascending arcs about an elevated platform. I am invited to join the platform guests, which include the two deputy directors of the Institute, an interpreter, and Mekhlis, who takes the chair. We all sit behind a long, wooden table. In front of Mekhlis is a fixture, which includes a bell and hammer. To our left, a separate podium. Behind, blackboards and screens for visual displays. There are fifty scientists present, including several who have travelled north from Tselinograd.

Mekhlis opens the proceedings and introduces me. I present a verbal summary of the proposal. (The proposal is to be found in Appendix A.) A general discussion follows.

On the one hand, the discussion has an *ad hoc* quality to it. The questions raised and issues addressed naturally reflect the interests and preoccupations of those who choose to speak. On the other hand, it becomes clear that there are several common threads which bind these *ad hoc* preoccupations together.

One scientist expresses an interest in the development of crop varieties and production procedures that are free of chemical and other "artificial" forms of intervention. The marriage of crop varieties with production technology and practices is evident. The objective: chemical-free, clean products.

Another scientist focusses on the issue of land erosion. We must learn

to control the riches of the soil, however, we must learn to go beyond what we have. We must manage soil fertility and study the nutritional requirements of different plants. Although we have preliminary data on this matter, we need to go beyond what we know.

Another scientist argues that in matters of soil tillage, we must consider all natural and human issues. However, research requires funding and this has become problematic in the republic. Another concern is the organization of production. We cannot take present arrangements for granted. They must be examined, and if found wanting, modified.

In what seems to be a rebuttal, a colleague argues that the mode of production is not problematic. Land-use organization in relation to different soil types is the issue. There is a need to integrate the experiences arising from different conditions. More attention should be given to the question of land contour; we need to move towards the creation of sustainable landscapes. This particular scientist acknowledges that while he used to believe that the private ownership of land would address the issue of soil conservation, he is no longer sure. The experiences in North America would seem to belie such a belief. I agree.

There is a brief debate on the merits of summer fallow. Is this a necessary moisture conservation practice in a semiarid region? Or, does it lead to and indeed induce soil erosion? One is reminded of similar disagreements and exchanges in the Canadian Prairies.

Several scientists express the view that land use and the reorganization of production into small farm enterprises should be examined. What, they ask, is the proper ratio of cropland to forests and water? This is an ecological as well as an economic issue.

Others disagree. State control is necessary for proper and responsible conservation. At the end of the day, it is suggested that a policy which permits soil erosion represents poor economics.

Alexander Gromov, one of the two deputy directors, reminds the seminar that one must always return to final goals. In his view, one must recognize the right to the private ownership of land. One must determine the level of intensification that does damage the soil. Finally, there must be research into the problem of increasing the fertility of unarable land.

Mekhlis calls for a ten-minute break. Some leave the room to smoke, others gather in small groups. There is a general buzz about the place. A number of scientists come forward to shake hands and exchange pleasantries. I sense that my Kazakh companions are as excited about the seminar as I am. The interest they take in a foreign colleague is pronounced. One wonders if contact with the outside world is recent and therefore novel. Hard to judge. These scientists, after all, have been following agricultural practices and scientific research on the Canadian

Prairies since the late 1950s. There is truly a comparative and international dimension to their outlook.

Mekhlis reconvenes the seminar and when he is unable to bring order to the meeting, he rings the bell with the little hammer. Interesting. There is a measure of equality and colleagueship within this group. Rank alone cannot command order.

Mekhlis offers a summary of the meeting. He reports that the CPRC's proposal is approved in principal. How he comes to this conclusion is unclear. Was it discussed before? Is this really a meeting for clarification? Never mind. The desired result is in the bag. Why quarrel over process?

He goes on to say that our main objective is the development of sound soil-conservation policies and practices. We can achieve this by borrowing from other countries, to our mutual benefit. The proposal in question is novel in that it endeavours to address a broad issue, requiring the pulling together of different branches of science that have not always worked with each other in the past.

He reminds the seminar that our research will have a bearing on policy formation and development. Then, in what appears to be a digression, he argues that private property will not solve all problems. Economic considerations are crucial in a country like Kazakhstan. Collective farms take state money without a sense of responsibility. This digression appears to be for local consumption.

He concludes by suggesting that the Institute and the CPRC exchange reports at the end of the year and that an international conference be convened to consider the research results at the end of the study. It is acknowledged that both sides will be responsible for organizing and financing studies in their respective countries.

12:30 hrs.: Mekhlis and I gather at the hostel for lunch. Soup, a meat dish, bread, cucumbers and tea. Very tasty and fattening.

Our conversation returns to the morning session. I inquire whether I am correct in concluding that scientists at the Institute are divided over the issue of family farming. Mekhlis replies that I am.

He continues to point out that many have come to associate the problems of production with state or collective ownership of the principal means of production. It is now legal to establish a family farm in Kazakhstan, although the state intends to retain control over the natural resource.

Some family farms of about eleven hectares have been established. They represent a risk and an experiment. They are engaged in either trade or barter. The results of these experiments remain unknown. Certainly

there is not yet a rush on the part of farm workers to venture forth in this direction.

Mekhlis mentions another example of entrepreneurship, one in which an individual persuaded a group of farm workers to sow and harvest his crop for a fee. The results of the harvest were then sold by this individual to the state, at a considerable profit to himself. He provided no labour himself. Rather, he developed the scheme and managed a commercial deal.

This is more in the spirit of things, I reply. Western capitalism is well disposed to making money off the labour of others. Mekhlis smiles in agreement.

13:30 hrs.: I meet with three social scientists at the Institute. They are interested in discussing a number of problems associated with a sample survey they propose to undertake. Specifically they want to know how we in Canada would draw a sample and how many questions we would include on a questionnaire.

We discuss the questions at length. I gain the impression that the conduct of sample surveys is a new experience for the Institute. My counterparts are clearly eager to learn. There is an irony here. My faith in the efficacy of sample surveys has been badly compromised by experience. I mention this, but the point seems to escape my hosts. Perhaps it is a problem of translation. Our interpreter, Irene Semeneichina, is a charming woman, with a smile that could thaw a frozen room. She works at the Institute and has agreed to spell Mekhlis off for the afternoon. She is more used to working with documents and encounters some difficulty in following the conversation and exchange, in both English and Russian. Never mind. She perseveres.

15:00 hrs.: Irene Semeneichina and I leave the Institute in the company of Vladimir Ivanovitch Gluhoftsov, the manager of the experimental farm. He is a tall, stocky Ukrainian of middle age. He wears a fedora and leather jacket.

His chauffeur is an elderly, dapper little man with a neat military moustache and a tweed hat, perched on his grey wiry head at a cocky angle. He navigates around and past erratic automobile and truck drivers with practiced assurance.

En route to the farm we pass several herds of cattle, each attended by a mounted herdsman. Several are made up of cattle which belong to specific individuals, resident in Shortandy. The experimental farms provide pasture, free of charge. The charge to herd and maintain the livestock costs a villager 25 rubles a year per beast if he or she works for the Institute. Otherwise the charge is 50 rubles per year per beast.

The experimental farm itself lies south of Shortandy and east of the Tselinograd highway. It encompasses 60,000 hectares of land, 47,000 of which are under cultivation — 25,000 hectares are sown to small grains, the rest is in perennial grasses, forage crops and summer fallow. The farm has 10,000 pigs, 7,000 cattle (representing a cross between Herefords and Reds) and 700 dairy cows. The farm sells between 400 and 500 tonnes of grain to the Tselinograd *oblast* each year. The rest is sold as seed to state farms. The farm employs 1,100 individuals, including agronomists, drivers, machinists, herdsmen, mechanics and office clerks.

We tour several grain storage bins, affixed with cleaning equipment. Then we visit one of the main cattle corrals and barns. The beasts appear robust and content. Everything is neat, including the roadways, despite the spring rains. I begin to get the impression that they run and manage a tight ship on this particular establishment.

We leave the barns and corrals for the fields, where in the distance a team of farm workers is engaged in spring seeding. I am told that the work force on the farm is broken down into brigades, made up of a brigade leader and twenty-two machinists.

We arrive at a small cluster of wooden buildings, at the corner of one of the fields. A tall, trim, well-built man in his fifties approaches our vehicle. He is wearing grey slacks, a white shirt (with no tie) and a fedora. His name is Stanislav Ivanovitch Gauroluk. He is a brigade leader, a member of the Kazakhstan Parliament, and a Hero of Socialist Labour.

At the farm manager's invitation, Gauroluk rhymes off a set of facts and figures. His tone of voice suggests he would prefer to speak of other matters.

His brigade is made up of twenty-two machinists, each of whom is trained in tractor driving, seeding, cultivating, harvesting, and undertaking minor repairs to tractors and implements.

The brigade covers 8,400 hectares — 3,500 hectares are sown to grain, 950 to corn, 1,800 to grasses, 800 to forage crops, and 840 hectares remain in fallow. The brigade has ten large tractors, five small tractors for yard work, twenty-five seed drills and fifteen combines.

Spring seeding is done within eight to ten days. Work rotates, like in Saskatchewan, I am told. In the winter, the brigade repairs machinery, hauls grain, traps snow and undertakes general farm maintenance.

Gauroluk jumps into our car with the rest of us and we drive out to the fields for an inspection. We make several stops to observe crop and soil conditions. Gauroluk is very much in charge.

Two teams are seeding in an adjoining field. We drive across and inspect the machinery, as the men arrange to refill the seed drills.

"Come here," Gauroluk orders with enthusiasm. I sense we are about to be treated to a lecture. I am not disappointed.

We walk over to one of the seed drills. I am informed that it represents a copy of a Canadian implement, redesigned and built in Tselinograd. "Look," Gauroluk instructs. "Tell me which of these pneumatic hoists are from the original Canadian implement." I do as I am directed, but for a moment I am at a loss for a credible answer. Machinery was never my domain.

Gauroluk becomes impatient. In desperation, I note that some hoists are leaking oil, others are dry. Gauoluk's face breaks out in a triumphant smile. "*Da. Da.* Now tell me. Which ones were manufactured in Tselinograd?"

What to do? Be polite and diplomatic, that is to say, lie, or tell the truth? I choose the latter course and I am rewarded with another lecture.

Craftsmanship. Pride in workmanship. It is not to be found among the workers of Tselinograd, Gauroluk declares in anger. He goes on to suggest that this is a problem which must be overcome if the standard of production and living is ever to improve. It is not good enough to copy the product, he suggests. One must also emulate the example of the workmanship that goes into the product.

We climb back into the car and return to the cluster of wooden buildings at the corner of one of the fields. One of the buildings is a canteen. Several workers are finishing a meal and preparing to return to the fields. They are young men, and from their facial appearances and complexions appear to come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds. Their conversations cease as we enter the canteen. I nod in the direction of several of them and I am greeted with a shy shake of the head in acknowledgement.

We sit around a table and Gauroluk orders tea. The canteen is plain and neat: wooden tables and chairs, wooden floor and walls. While clean, the room could be brightened up with fresh paint. But then, the purpose of the room is to feed hungry workers, covered in field dust.

I ask about canteen prices and Gauroluk offers another lecture. A year ago, a worker could purchase a meal for 1 ruble and 50 kopecs. Now, despite subsidization, the price has gone up to 10 rubles.

Wages have been increased twelve times in order to keep up with inflation. Yet, there is a general fear that everyone is falling behind, that the standard of living is dropping,

This fear is felt at the level of the experimental farm itself. A tractor, which cost 11,000 rubles in 1989 now is priced at one million rubles. Yet, there are no stable prices for agricultural products.

Pointing to the workers leaving the canteen, Gauroluk adds: "See

these young men. Before, 80 percent of them could afford to buy a car. Now they can't afford to run one nor buy one. Even for food, farm workers have to become peasants, growing their own vegetables and keeping their own livestock, just to survive."

I mention the ethnic mix of the work force in the brigade, a matter of pride to Gauroluk. "We come from different backgrounds. We all work together, as it should be," he asserts with emotion. "But what now? My mother lives in the Ukraine. My sister lives in Russia. I need a passport to visit my own family, in my own country."

Simple people, he argues, are opposed to the break up of the USSR along nationalist lines. They oppose, he continues, these new economic trends. Gorbachev is at fault, and with his departure, the new leaders have made things worse.

There is a Calvanist bent to this veteran brigade leader. It shows in his attitude towards work, his political views, and the definitive way in which he proclaims them. No wishy-washy Methodism here. If there are ten points of view, Gauroluk will be certain as to which one is correct and impatient of those who equivocate. Yet there is humour and mischief to the man. His handsome face is always breaking into a grin. He continues to watch me intently, measuring my facial reactions to everything he says, sometimes displaying impatience with the time taken to translate.

We take our leave. As we are about to enter our car, I notice a red flag flying brightly above another wooden building facing the canteen. I draw it to the attention of Irene, our interpreter.

Gauroluk notices the gesture and in a flash booms out: "We fly the red flag here. We are still proud." His stern face breaks into a broad smile. As we pull away, he stands alone in the little courtyard, his right hand high in salute: a clenched fist.

18:30 hrs.: I am invited to dine with Larissa Selisnova, the learned secretary of the Institute and a cousin of Marina Gaidina, whose apartment I had used while in Moscow.

Larissa resides in an attractive, two-storey duplex, within walking distance of the hostel. The lawn which divides the duplex from the street is ill kept — a garden of weeds is what it is. But behind, on the side which Irene Semeneichina and I choose to enter, the duplex faces private gardens, the very picture of ingenuity, care and attention. Interesting. Private gardens are well cared for and tended. Public space is left to fester.

Larissa is married to Alexander Arkadyvitch Selisnov, a scientist at the Institute. They have one son, Dimitri. Their elderly grandmother is the fourth resident of the house.

The entrance to the home is a foyer, with a staircase leading to the upper floor. Beside the foyer is a kitchen, of good size, reasonably equipped. To the front of the house is the living-dining room: large, spacious, tastefully furnished.

There are three bedrooms upstairs, one of which is occupied by the grandmother. She is confined to bed. She is nevertheless pleased to meet the foreigner and I learn later that having a "guest" in the home was considered by her to be a singular honour to her family.

The bedrooms are of modest size, again well furnished. At the end of the small hallway is a W.C.

Although the outside of the building could do with a good coat of paint, the duplex is attractive and compares favourably with Canadian standards. I will learn later that this kind of public housing is considered up-market in the village.

So here we are for the evening: Irene, myself and a young Kazakh family of Russian ancestry. I am about to be taught another lesson in generosity.

We exchange pleasantries. We are all a bit nervous and I choose to complement Irene on her skill as an interpreter. She quickly demurs, but the exchange appears to ease matters somewhat.

We gather about the dining table, located at one end of the living room. Once again, it is a display of art. Beautiful china, tastefully arranged. *Hors d'oeuvres* of one kind and another and, to my great relief, an attractive plate of sliced cucumbers.

We start with a filling and delicious soup, followed by *permea* — little dumplings filled with ground beef and pork and boiled in salt water. Superb. Alexander, or Sasha as his wife affectionately calls him, acts as toastmaster, and acquits himself with distinction. In no time at all the conversation is flowing and Irene has discovered a command of English that merits envy.

After two hours, we break from the meal and retire to the other part of the living room. Larissa produces several albums of photos, which we review with pleasure. The albums contain, after all, the same topics of interest that appeal to Canadian families, with one notable exception. Few Canadian families have their picture taken with the prime minister. Not so with the Selisnovs. They have one taken with Gorbachev. This, surely, is a portent of an interesting evening to come.

We regather about the table for homemade cake and tea, both of which are complemented with vodka and more toasts. Sasha and Larissa choose to talk about their families, and themselves.

Both are the grandchildren of *kulaks*, removed from the Ukraine and

Russia during the 1930s. Both have vivid stories of the suffering inflicted by Stalin: forced migration, isolation, poverty, stigmatization.

Since both were born in Kazakhstan I raise the national question with them. At first they treat the issue in a matter-of-fact way. But as the conversation progresses, they admit to a measure of concern. Clearly, the breakup of the USSR troubles them. It is as though they can no longer assume their status as *bona fide* citizens in the Kazakh Republic.

We speak of prices, the cost of living, the fact that members of the Institute went without pay for a period of time, due to the shortage of rubles. I express astonishment. They inquire as to how Canadians would react. I speak of the formation of protest organizations, public demonstrations, pressure, and attacks on politicians.

They express surprise. It turns out that Sasha and Larissa were both members of the Kommosol. Larissa recalls with fondness an earlier period when the Communist youth of the town would commit one day of free labour as a civic duty.

They are clearly troubled by the change in economic affairs. They are decidedly uncertain as to what the future holds. They have enjoyed political as well as scientific careers. Yet, they are paralyzed by the present state of affairs. They have no answers. They are at a loss as to what must be done.

Well, not quite. At a personal level, they are responding as others have done. They have an excellent garden. Root crops are stored for the winter in their cellar. Cucumbers and tomatoes are salted and pickled in three-litre jars. Larissa puts up from thirty to forty jars a year. They have a *dacha* outside of Shortandy and keep cattle. Without these measures, they acknowledge, they would be hard pressed indeed.

The evening draws to a close. It has been a memorable meal and visit. As I prepare to take leave, Larissa presents me with a breadboard, with a Kazakh design. Quite unexpected. Very touching. Moist eyes, as we embrace and bid farewell.

I return to the hostel and thank Irene for all her help. I assure her that the evening could never have happened without her. She is a real trooper, who takes her responsibilities seriously. A credit to the Institute.

I retire to bed, but cannot sleep. I am troubled by the fact that two young, bright, well-educated members of the former Communist Party, trained for leadership, are incapacitated by the present economic and political crises. What did the Communist Party teach them? For what did it groom them? To be passive, obedient little bureaucrats? To follow orders and look upwards for guidance? Good grief. Is this the legacy of Lenin's band of revolutionaries, the men and women who shook the world? Fatigue and finally sleep rescue me from my torment.

Tuesday, June 8

09:00 hrs.: A free morning to write up my diary and collect my thoughts. Last night there was no hot water in the hostel. The town has a heating plant which provides steam heat and hot water for all the buildings in Shortandy. Admittedly, this is June, but so far it has been a cold June.

11:00 hrs.: How to collect your thoughts when you can't make sense of what you see and hear? I decide to go for a walk. There are a few people about, mostly women and children, none of whom take notice of me. I saunter through the town centre, then head east for the small train station and railway tracks. Several goods trains roar past, all powered by single electric engines. It is clear that the highway has yet to challenge rail transportation in this part of the world.

On my return to the hostel, I notice quite a few chickens, geese and ducks in the yards behind the public duplexes. Most of the streets are paved, but several are merely dirt paths. Again, the public way is scruffy, unattended, uncared for. Public housing leaves the same impression. It is the private garden plots that offer an attractive and alternative contrast.

12:30 hrs.: I dine at the hostel with Mekhlis. Simple fare, good and fattening. I exempt the cucumber, of course.

Our conversation turns to the issue of ethnicity. Mekhlis informs me that the original Kazakh population is by no means homogeneous. For example, the Kazakhs to the south speak a dialect which is closer to Uzbek than the dialect spoken in the north.

The non-Kazakh population arrived in the republic in two waves. The first is associated with the Stalin era and included displaced *kulaks*, along with peasants and workers sent east into exile. The second wave is associated with Khrushchev's virgin-land policy. This wave was made up of young volunteers, prepared to resettle in the east in the hope of adventure and improving their lot.

Although Mekhlis is too polite to say so, I am left with the suggestion of resentment on the part of the indigenous Kazakh population. There are a number of considerations: the use of Russian as the language of practice and necessity; the displacement of Kazakhs from their ancient, unfenced, prairie grasslands; the control of many institutions by individuals of non-Kazakh origin.

There is something else. Mekhlis reminds me how pleased our Kazakh hosts were when, on Sunday evening last, I took receipt of that sheep's head with a cheery "*Wrackmet*," rather than "*Spacebo*," the former being the Kazakh word for "thank you."

He goes on to confess that in his opinion, far too many individuals of

Russian, Ukrainian, German and Byelorussian background never made the effort to learn to express themselves, if only in a few words, in the Kazakh language. He suggested that this was noticed, and resented.

There is another consideration. The republic has agreed to permit and perhaps encourage private family farming. At issue is the question of land ownership. Mekhlis estimates that a minority of farm workers are interested in acquiring the ownership of farm land. This minority, however, included few men and women of Kazakh ancestry. The concept of the common, of pasture and farm land belonging to the community is deeply embedded in Kazakh custom and folkways. The private acquisition of land is seen as a threat to the community, to a particular way of life, to a particular "nation" of people.[9]

The republic faces a problem. Kazakh has been declared the official language of state, even though only 20 percent of the population are fluent in the language. What will happen? Perhaps some will leave. Many Volga Germans are exploring the possibility, even though Russian is their only language.

Mekhlis expresses the hope that good will and tolerance will win the day. And it will, if the citizens of the republic follow his example.

14:30 hrs.: I arrange to return to the experimental farm with Irene in tow. My conversation with the brigade leader has raised far too many unanswered questions in my mind. Gauroluk is surprised and pleased to see me.

We reunite at the cluster of wooden buildings in the corner of one of the fields. I am invited into a neat little building, which serves, I gather, as his field office. The furniture is old, but everything is tidy and in order.

I realize that I have more questions than there is time for answers. Moreover, translation again becomes problematic. Dear, loyal, Irene. She tries so hard. She wants to please. But she lacks practice and confidence. Nothing a bottle of vodka could not cure. I curse myself for failing to bring one. Gauroluk would polish one off with the best of them. Nevertheless, we push on and I record now a summary of our conversation.

Seventy five percent of the labour force on the experimental farm is under 40 years of age. In the case of Gauroluk's brigade, the men who make it up represent a new and second generation of farm workers. They have taken over from their fathers, who are now retired.

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9 It is interesting to note that this attitude towards the public ownership of land caught the attention of *Izvestia*, which carried a lengthy story on the topic in its June 23 edition. See *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 44, no. 25 (1992).

Despite economic difficulties and political uncertainties, morale within the brigade is high. The work is out-of-doors, pleasant. At harvest time you see the fruits of your labour.

The men work and dine together; they take pleasure in the company of each other. The work is regular, eight-hour days in the main. The men share in the product of their labour. If they work well and hard, their income rises. There is security, certainty about life. These young men were born in this *oblast*. Like most, they do not want to leave. Not from this region.

The government has chosen to give land to small farms, especially family farms. The legislation is to be phased in over time. The state will retain ownership of the land. Families may lease it on the condition they work it.

The old people don't want this new arrangement. Most young people can't afford it. What happens to them if they fail? Where do they market their products? What price will they get? Who will lend them money? Where do they get machinery? (The clear implication is that the division of labour on state and collective farms has resulted in specialization in one but not all phases of production. As we know in Canada, a farmer must be a jack of all trades and a master of most.)

Mention is made of one local cooperative farm that had to rely on support from the experimental farm. "They have 300 hectares. They could not arrange to sow their crop," Gauroluk adds with contempt. "They come to us. They pay us to sow it. We do this in one day. One day!"

Gauroluk is warming up. Irene has difficulty in keeping up. He speaks with conviction. There is resolution and defiance in this man. One is given the impression that his commitment to socialism is deep and unselfish.

"The top leadership of the republics is out of touch. They know nothing of collective life. They do not know how to solve the needs of the people. This market economy they speak of, it will be the ruin of us. After the war, we rebuilt the USSR. We went from devastation to prosperity, in my lifetime," Gauroluk stresses emphatically. "Now, where are we?" he asks in anger.

We have been together for over an hour. It is time to go. Strange, in such a short time, despite a language barrier, I have come to trust and admire this Hero of Socialist Labour. He is clearly a leading Communist who remains with his "ain folk," in the fields of northern Kazakhstan, working the land. He has served history in his own way and by his own lights. And how has history served him?

I can see him still, standing in the courtyard once again, alone; fist

raised in a defiant salute; a warm smile on his broad, handsome face; the red flag in place, smacking smartly in the prairie wind.

18:30 hrs.: I am once again invited out for dinner. Apparently a number of invitations were forthcoming from scientists at the Institute. They agreed among themselves to meet in the home of one of them — Kursan and Rosa Achmetov, the husband being Kazakh and the wife being Tartar.

The other guests are Rachmin Bachtibaev, a Kazakh who is trilingual, speaking Kazakh, Russian and English, and Adolf Lichtenberg, a Volga German who speaks Russian and can understand English.

The home is located in the same row of public duplexes in which the Selisnovs reside; inside it is spacious, attractive, comfortable.

We enjoy a rousing good meal, anchored in steamed mutton. Delicious. Much of the discussion focusses on research. It is interesting to discover that many of the difficulties encountered in the Canadian scientific community are to be found in Kazakhstan and, I gather, the other republics which made up the former USSR.

Specialization has been favoured, with the result that interdisciplinary research is rare and difficult to organize. Yet, there is a growing recognition that specialization and the focussing on the specific has gone too far; there is a need to return to more general, broader issues. In our preoccupation with the trees, so to speak, we have lost sight of the forest.

Funding for research has become problematic. In the past, the scientific community could count on the state, which displayed a generous and enlightened attitude towards it. Now this has changed. The state faces a severe financial crisis. Production is off. Prices are spiralling out of control. There is a shortage of currency. The members of the Institute were not paid for several months, due to the lack of currency. Scientists had to dip into their savings.

There is the suggestion that knowledge has become a commodity; something to sell. Institutes are expected to work out contractual arrangements with state and cooperative farms. Put another way, the producers of food have been given a major say in what should be investigated. In return for this privilege, they are expected to pay for it.

While my three hosts acknowledge the importance of conducting socially relevant research, they are troubled by the fact that scientific inquiry has a tendency to set its own agenda and that this tendency may be forsaken in the new scheme of things.

There is an intense interest in Canada in general and Saskatchewan in particular. Mention is made of a number of issues for which they seek

comparable data. I make a list of issues and promise to search for relevant journals upon my return to Canada.

There is also an enthusiasm for joint, international conferences and seminars. They are far more curious about the world beyond than our scientists are. And they are unmistakably dedicated to their work. Our conversation reminds me of the first impression I formed when I visited the Institute on Saturday last. The commitment to the scientific enterprise is deep and unshakable. I think of some academics I know of in Canada who have done nothing of note for years, abusing the necessary tradition of tenure, and supping at the public trough.

It is midnight. I am not permitted to leave empty-handed. Each of my colleagues presents me with a gift: a volume of Shakespeare, in Russian; a collection of poems by the Kazakh poet, Olchas Souleimenov (a cousin of Mekhlis); and, a collection of prose, memoirs and essays by Evelyn Waugh, of all people, in English (with a Russian introduction and notes).

Rosa shares in the generosity and presents me with a beautiful pair of engraved, silver bracelets, for my wife. Authentic Kazakh handicraft.

All three of my colleagues insist on walking me back to the hostel. En route Bachtibaev pursuades the spirited party to share one more drink in his flat. This we cheerfully do.

At last to bed, on top of the world. A few hours sleep and it will be off again, on the long train journey back to Moscow. The thought of departing is not pleasant. I am taken by the plains of northern Kazakhstan. I have enjoyed all whom I have met. They are gifted, dedicated, hard-working men and women, generous to a fault, the best of company. I feel at home here.

Wednesday, June 10

02:30 hrs.: I am awoken by Mekhlis. I freshen up, dress and grab my gear. Franz is at the door with the car, bright and agreeable as usual, despite the hour of the day.

We drive to the station to meet the Moscow train that is en route from Karaganda, a large mining and industrial city to the south of Tselinograd.

03:17 hrs.: The Moscow train arrives on time, seventeen carriages in all, powered by a large single electric engine. There are about twelve others at the station, waiting to board.

We find our carriage, but to our dismay there is no conductor to open the door. Several local passangers bang on the door and curse, to no avail. Mekhlis expresses alarm. He fears the train will pull out without us.

I step forward and inspect the door. Pulling myself up by the handrail, I find the unlatching mechanism and open the door. Then a warm

farewell embrace from Franz and I join the others aboard. None too soon. The train immediately begins to glide out of the station, on its long journey north.

Still no conductor. Mekhlis is irritated. We find the conductor's compartment and knock. Eventually, the door opens and there appears a slim, attractive young woman, her auburn hair done up in a pony tail. She is wearing an exceedingly attractive kimono. There is a scent of perfume from her compartment.

She rubs the sleep out of her eyes and inquires as to what we want. Irritation has given way to disbelief. Mekhlis informs this "Sleeping Beauty" that we, with others, boarded the train at Shortandy and that we have reserved accommodation in this carriage.

The news seems to surprise Sleeping Beauty. She shuffles about in her compartment, retrieves her booking papers and suggests we find whatever space is available. Then, with some reluctance, she goes next door to a storage cabinet and procures sheets, pillow cases and towels. She then disappears into her compartment, without even a "good night."

Mekhlis dutifully finds me an empty upper berth in a four-berth compartment, then disappears, leaving me to fend for myself. I swing my gear aloft, climb up, and promptly fall asleep.

08:00 hrs.: I awake to bright sunshine pouring through the open door to my compartment. I look about. Opposite, the two berths are occupied by an elderly couple. He is dressed in slacks and an underwear shirt. She is wearing a nightgown, covered with a dressing gown. A young man, half dressed, is rustling about in the lower berth beneath me.

Not thinking, I give my newfound companions a cheery *"Dobra Utra."* All three reply, in a torrent of words I cannot understand. Good grief. I am up the creek now without a paddle. I had forgotten that I was without an interpreter. What a mess. I give the three of them a sheepish grin and shrug my shoulders. They look at each other and decide the best policy is to ignore the foreigner. I pull the sheet over me and feign sleep. Where is Mekhlis?

Nature, not Mekhlis, takes charge. I pluck up my courage, swing my legs down, and alight from my berth. I walk down the companionway to the toilet, located at the end of the carriage. It is unoccupied. The place is foul, by anyone's standards. No towels, no toilet paper. A basin with cold water only. From the water slushing about the floor. I wonder if some passengers have relieved themselves there, rather than take advantage of the filthy toilet provided by the thoughtful state railway company.

Upon my return to my compartment, I meet Mekhlis in the corridor. It turns out he was bunked in with three young Kazakhs; gangsters, more

than likely, he says with a smile. He has good news. He has found another compartment with only two passengers in it. They have agreed to share it with us.

I return to my compartment and retrieve my gear. My mates of the night seem indifferent to my departure. I join Mekhlis at the other end of the carriage and I am introduced to my new travelling companions.

The first is Valentina Dobrovolskaya, a middle-aged grandmother on her return to the Ukraine from Karaganda. She is short, dumpy, dressed in a faded dressing gown. Her feet are covered in old slippers. Her round face is tired and plain. Her straight brown air is limp and doesn't respond to her frequent attempts to bring it alive with a comb. I shake her hand and get the feeling that she is having second thoughts about inviting a foreigner to share her compartment.

The second companion is Vladimir Sergeivitch Zharkov, a retired colonel in the Red Army. Six feet tall, broadly built, he has a large, rough-hewn, yet handsome face. He is dressed in slippers (no socks), slacks and an underwear shirt. He is erect in his bearing. He has a grip to his handshake. He speaks in a voice accustomed to command. From the moment you meet him, you instantly know who is going to be in charge of this little group of wayfarers. His formidable appearance, however, is compromised by a flaw. His eyes dance with mischief.

The train is approaching Petropavlovsk, a rail junction north of Kazakhstan on the trans-Siberian railway. It is going on 9:00 hrs. and still no sign of Sleeping Beauty. The train pulls into a large station and comes to a halt. Several new passengers impatiently wait on the platform, anxious to board the train. At last, our conductoress makes an appearance, dressed in slacks and an attractive blouse. Her hair is still in a pony tail. She appears well rested. She opens the door and lets the new passengers aboard. This young woman, I suspect, is not happy in her work.

The train pulls out and heads east. There is no air conditioning in our carriage, or the others, for that matter. We are travelling peasant class on this voyage. The day is warming up. The temperature in the carriage is approaching 30°. Mekhlis and I take station in the corridor, by an open window. The draft provides welcome relief.

The Colonel joins us. It turns out that he recognized Mekhlis, when they met earlier in the morning in the corridor. Mekhlis makes frequent appearances on TV on matters concerning agriculture. The Colonel recognized the face.

I thank him for permitting us to join him and Valentina. Not at all, he replies grandly. "You see," he confides, " at first I want compartment to myself, to have woman. But then, Valentina joins me in Karaganda. What

luck. But she will not have me." Then, with a twinkle in his eye he turns to Valentina, who is standing in the entrance to our compartment, for confirmation. "*Da, Da,*" she acknowledges with contempt and dismisses the Colonel with a wave of her hand.

The Colonel takes the rebuff with humour and grace. If he can't have a woman, he will have good company. So, Valentina had nothing to do with the invitation to share the compartment. It is not necessary, the Colonel avers. Peasant women, it would seem, know their place in this the first European society with claims to a socialist heritage.

12:00 hrs.: Mekhlis has bought provisions and I have purchased vodka at one of the station stops. We join our companions for our first meal together. The Colonel produces a copy of *Pravda*, removes a page and sets it down on the little table between the berths. The idea of eating off the "truth" appeals to his sense of humour. Indeed, we all have a good laugh, including Valentina, who allows that at least the celebrated newspaper has found a useful purpose in the affairs of men and women.

The Colonel and Valentina share their food with ours, without a thought. Sausage, horse meat, green onions, cheese, bread, boiled eggs, cucumbers.

Valentina takes a special interest in my medication and the Colonel allows that vodka will cure anything. Again Valentina dismisses the Colonel with a wave of her hand. There is nothing hostile in her gesture, but it is clear that she is not going to stand any nonsense from the Red Army, sexual or otherwise.

13:20 hrs.: We arrive in Kurgan and disembark, to stroll along the crowded platform. Peddlars are everywhere: old women, young men. Ice cream, beer, vodka, fresh radishes, boiled potatoes, newspapers, dried fish. Some passengers make purchases, but many more walk away cursing when they discover the prices.

It is quite remarkable. Here is a thriving trade, but the tradesmen are viewed and treated with undisguised hostility. One middle-aged women curses an old crone, selling radishes. "Thief, criminal" she shouts in the peddler's face. The old lady stares straight ahead, ignores the insult and continues to holler, "Radishes, fresh radishes, good for the health."

We reboard the train and depart for the Urals. Sleeping Beauty decides it is time to sweep the corridor and clean the carriage. She has donned yellow rubber gloves to protect her gentle hands.

The Colonel is up and about, interrupting Sleeping Beauty in her appointed duties and chatting her up. In no time at all he has her giggling. I suggest, when he returns to our compartment, that he has a way with

women. Valentina greets this observation with a dismissive laugh. The Colonel, in turn, gallantly accepts the compliment and offers an explanation for his behaviour.

He entertains us with a declaration of his personal and political philosophy. "As a Communist and officer in the Soviet Army, I have an obligation to share my body with any woman who wants it. To do otherwise would be a dereliction of duty. It would be an act of selfishness. It would be anti-socialist, anti-Soviet."

Mekhlis and I greet this declaration with fits of laughter. Valentina rises from her berth, shakes her head as if to say, "foolish, vain man," and waddles out into the fresh air blowing through the corridor window. The Colonel decides the moment calls for a dram and produces a cucumber and bottle. We are interrupted by Sleeping Beauty, who arrives to sweep out our compartment. She might have made a better job of it had she spent less attention on the Colonel. "Natasha Nicolovana," he observes, "You work too hard. You should take rest. To keep your youth, your beauty." Sleeping Beauty agrees and disappears for the rest of the afternoon.

17:34 hrs.: We arrive at Chelabinsk, on the eastern side of the Urals. We dine again, on the same fare and in the same way. Most pleasant, with the Colonel leading the conversation. Poor Mekhlis. He hardly has time to eat.

Toasts abound. Even Valentina joins us for one or two. She appears to be getting used to having a foreigner in the compartment. She is much more at ease. We are becoming a congenial group.

At one point, I carelessly propose a toast to the memory of Nikita Sergeivitch Khrushchev. "Why him?" the Colonel asks in an irritated tone of voice. I suggest that he was the first Soviet leader since Stalin to endeavour to reach out to the West for a peaceful resolution of the cold war.

The Colonel accepts this and raises his glass. But then he turns serious and confides that Georgi Malenkov was by far the better man. I am surprised by this observation but before I can pursue it, Valentina interrupts. "They are all the same. Malenkov, Khrushchev, Gorbachev, Yeltsin. We survive, despite them." I am surprised again. The Colonel is respectful, not dismissive of this peasant woman's views. Her intervention is appreciated, not resented.

Valentina continues. Conditions are bad and they are getting worse. Before there was security, a good standard of living, at least compared to the war years. But now, the standard of living is dropping. There is *glasnost* — openness — but talk does not feed an empty belly. The

reforms? They make it possible to rob people, cheat people. Before, such people went to jail. Now they get rich. The politicians do not know what they are doing. They make things worse.

Valentina rises. It is long after 20:00 hrs. The compartment is hot and she is visibly tired. She retires to the corridor for fresh air.

The Colonel fetches another bottle of vodka in anticipation of a long, cheerful evening. I suggest that we move out to the corridor and let Valentina get her head down, after she has cooled off. The Colonel will not hear of it. Russian women are used to these things, he asserts. "But Canadian women are not," I reply gently, but firmly. The Colonel gives me the eye, mutters to himself, then, with a bright smile on his broad face, he takes my point and the three of us make way for Valentina.

She, of course, has overheard the conversation, but says nothing. She stands by the window with the rest of us for a few more minutes. The Colonel cheers us up with another of his anecdotes.

Some years ago, in a garrison town in southern Kazakhstan, where he resided with his wife, he had taken a mistress, a young single woman with a five-year-old daughter. For a time, everything went well. The Colonel liked the child but became troubled when she acquired the habit of referring to him as "Papa." Come November, the Colonel and his wife turned out for the annual parade celebrating the Russian Revolution. One of the marching contingents included a trade-union group, to which the Colonel's mistress belonged. As a treat, she permitted her young daughter to march with her. When the two of them passed the point on the route where the Colonel and his wife were standing, the youngster recognized her mother's lover and greeted him with a loud and cheery "Hello Papa." "Soviet Staff College did not provide instructions to officers as to how to handle such a contingency," the Colonel concluded.

Valentina has heard enough. As she returns to our compartment she places her pudgy hand on my arm and says: "You too must get sleep. And the pills. Do not forget the pills." Good old Valentina. My guardian angel.

Dusk falls as we approach the Urals. The temperature in the carriage is now more bearable. We all look forward to a good night's sleep.

Thursday, June 11

07:30 hrs.: The Colonel awakes the compartment and orders us to prepare for breakfast. He is as cheery as ever and in a matter of minutes he has all three of us laughing. Once again, we dine off *Pravda*.

08:29 hrs.: The train pulls into Preutova. Five passengers assemble on the platform before our carriage. Sleeping Beauty is nowhere to be seen. The Colonel, Mekhlis and I are standing in the corridor, leaning out of an

open window. The Colonel gives us a wink and heads for the vestibule. He opens the door and in a loud voice welcomes the passengers aboard the train. One passenger wants to know who he is. Why, he replies, the deputy conductor, in the service of the people. Sleeping Beauty must have overheard the remark, for she rouses herself from her bed and, in slippers and dressing gown, joins the Colonel and new passengers. The Colonel looks interested and Natasha Nicolovana has difficulty in concentrating on her duties. The gallant Colonel again comes to the rescue, escorting the bewildered passengers to compartments, at random. "Never mind," he reassures an angry old war veteran who insists he is being placed in the wrong compartment. "We are all one happy family in this carriage."

The train pulls out of the station and we return to our compartment, chuckling. I almost spoil the morning's sport by becoming serious and observing that in Canada a conductor would be fired for such dereliction of duty. The Colonel replies that this is but a bourgeois attitude, a product of capitalism. These things are permissible under socialism, he adds gleefully. Valentina once again dismisses the Colonel with a wave of her hand, but she is careful not to come to Sleeping Beauty's defence.

We are on the western side of the Urals now, having crossed the mountains during the night. We are on the mixed forest-steppe again, with its rolling farm land and forests of birch and pine. Outside but close to the major urban centres, are clusters of *dachas*, surrounded by neat, cultivated garden plots.

The *dachas* offer a remarkable contrast with the public housing in the cities and towns. They come in all shapes and sizes. Some display remarkable ingenuity in design. There are A-frames; huts built in the Dutch style; one complex reminds me of the housing units found at Habitat, in Montreal.

Most are constructed of wood and in more cases than not, care, time and money have been spent in making them attractive to the eye. Many are painted, in bright colours. I am assured that these *dachas* and their gardens have become an economic necessity. In their design and appearance, they also seem to be a political act of defiance; a rebuke to public housing. People seem to be saying: "Look what the state does. Look how the state provides. Now, look what I have done."

I take a moment to raise some vexing issues with Mekhlis. First, the national question. Mekhlis endeavours to place the issue in an historical context. Until the breakup of the USSR, Russia and Moscow dominated the state. Russian was the official language, even though many people in Georgia and Lithuania refused to speak it — then and now.

Decisions were ultimately made in Moscow. Even railway time schedules were published, using Moscow time, despite the time zone differences within the Union.

The constitution was one thing. Practice was another story. Mekhlis points out that he was the first scientist of Kazakh origin to become head of the Grain Research Institute. He was promoted over the heads of two Russians by another — none other than Alexander Nikonov.

Children were raised to believe that while they might reside in Kazakhstan, the Ukraine, or some other republic, they were Soviet citizens. And to be Soviet was to be Russian, at least in speech.

With the breakup of the USSR, many national groups have been given their head. In Georgia and Uzbekistan, Russian is no longer an official language. Kazakhstan is different, as most of the population cannot speak Kazakh. But even there, there is pressure to elevate the status and use of the Kazakh language.

Mekhlis appears to be sanguine about the matter. But the reports of ethnic violence and clashes in Soviet newspapers and on TV would suggest the problem is widespread and that the various republics are ill-equipped to deal with it constructively.

We are joined by the Colonel and I turn the conversation once again to his career as a soldier. The Colonel has an interesting story to tell.

He is the son of Ukrainian peasants, removed to Kazakhstan in the 1930s during Stalin's reign of terror. His father was killed during the war and Vladimir was raised by his mother, in poverty.

At school, he expressed an interest in and talent for art. When he graduated from high school, he realized that there was no provision for postsecondary education in his field of interest. Angry and irrepressible, he wrote an impertinent letter to Georgi Malenkov, who had just been appointed prime minister after the death of Stalin. Why, young Vladimir wanted to know, did someone like him have to go to Moscow, which he could not afford to do, in order to continue his education in the field of art?

The inquiry brought the KGB to the Zharkov home. Vladimir's mother was both terrified and outraged. She had long come to the conclusion that her mischievous offspring would be her ruin.

After several interrogations, the KGB departed. Nothing happened, until suddenly one day Vladimir received a letter in the mail. It was from Prime Minister Malenkov. He expressed an interest in Vladimir's wish to pursue his education and offered him a scholarship, to travel to and study in Moscow.

Vladimir was sorely tempted, but his mother needed him, for income

and assistance about the home and garden. Vladimir respectfully declined the offer, but never forgot his benefactor.

Soon after, Vladimir signed on to do his compulsory military service. He enjoyed army life, particularly in the absence of war, he adds with a chuckle. He decided to stay on. He was selected for officer training and promoted out of the ranks. In time, he moved up, achieving the rank of colonel before his retirement.

But it was when he held the rank of captain that Malenkov crossed his path again. In disgrace and expelled from the Communist Party in 1961, Malenkov was exiled to an industrial town in Kazakhstan, where Vladimir was posted. One day, while strolling down the main street, Vladimir encountered the veteran Stalinist, recognized him, and introduced himself. Malenkov was at first startled, wary, but Vladimir took him in hand, so to speak. For a period, the two of them would meet from time to time and talk. Then Malenkov vanished out of Vladimir's life.

It was on the basis of these conversations that the Colonel concluded that Malenkov would have made a better leader than Khrushchev. "He was a socialist, not a revisionist," the Colonel concludes. "We would not be in the mess we are in today if Malenkov had retained power," he assures us.

I direct the conversation to an examination of the current economic and political situation. The Colonel's views are close to Valentina's, who follows the conversation with interest. He suggests that there are many destructive forces at the top. Interestingly enough, both he and Valentina speak of Russia, Moscow and Yeltsin when they refer to "the top," even though Valentina resides in the Ukraine and the Colonel is a native of Kazakhstan.

He suggests that the political leadership has betrayed the country and forgotten the people. He confesses to quitting the Communist Party over Gorbachev's leadership.

"Look," he argues angrily, "after World War II we rebuilt the USSR over a period of five years. Now Yeltsin and his friends are going to the United States to borrow money. Why? And what will be the price to be paid for the Yankee money? We rebuilt without outside help," he repeats. "Now we destruct, with foreign money."

"But why the sudden turn in fortune?" I ask "The cold war," the Colonel replies. "Loss of faith," he adds. "A loss of faith in self-reliance. Now everyone must work harder and still the standard of living declines. The leaders turn to theoretical people, economists from the United States," he says with contempt. "They are not practical people. They are selfish. They are not concerned with the needs of the people."

Valentina enlarges the conversation. "Once we had savings, but nothing

to buy," she observes. "Now we have no savings and there is plenty to buy. But who can afford these things?" she asks in vain.

"What will happen?" I ask. The Colonel does not know, and it visibly troubles him to admit so. Valentina is more philosophical. "Our people have a great soul," she remarks quietly. "They understand what the issues are. For many years we believed. Now we are not sure. But a way will be found."

14:17 hrs.: The train arrives at Kubichov. We detrain onto a bustling platform in a large station. The sun is beaming down. It is very warm. There is a bit of a commotion. Apparently one of the passengers in a carriage to the rear of the train has taken ill. "He has turned green and cannot breathe," an old woman reports to anyone who will listen. Sleeping Beauty ignores her. She sits on the railway track between the next platform, her pretty head in her hands. Several young male passengers offer her the attention she clearly believes she deserves. The Colonel is off in the other direction. "Reconnaissance," he announces with a grin.

In the distance, two individuals in white uniforms approach. The man carries a black bag, the woman who accompanies him, and whom I take to be a doctor, smokes a cigarette. Neither is in a hurry. Emergencies, I gather, can be taken in stride. They pass us by, then disappear into a carriage at the rear of the train. We wait.

Time ticks by. The conductors are instructed to hang a red flag on their carriage, indicating a delay in travel. Half an hour goes by. I become concerned. A serious delay could result in me missing my flight out of Moscow to London.

At last, the medical team leaves the train. Rumour has it that the unfortunate passenger was consuming alcohol instead of vodka. "An unfortunate, but understandable mistake," the Colonel observes sympathetically. We get a green flag. The train pulls out to the east, towards the Volga.

17:36 hrs.: We cross the Volga and arrive at Syzran. We take refuge from the heat, on the shady side of the train, in the corridor by the window. We are running thirty minutes late. There is a delay in departing from Syzran. No point in worrying. We prepare for an evening meal. *Pravda* is once again put to good use. Valentina inquires as to whether I have taken my medication. Then, throughout the meal, she continues to push food in my direction. I am too thin, she observes with disapproval. But she is pleased, I discover, when I thank her by referring to her as "Comrade."

This innocent form of address gives rise to our dinner conversation. Since the collapse of the USSR, citizens are no longer sure what form of address to employ. Yet another uncertainty among so many.

For some, the word "comrade" has, like the Communist Party, fallen into disrepute. To address someone in this way can cause resentment. What then? Are "Mr. or Mrs." used, I ask. In some cases, yes. But in other cases "citizen" is appropriate. But for others this form of address, derived from the French Revolution, is not far enough removed from "comrade."

"At least, we know how to address you, Vladi," I suggest. "*Da*," he replies. "Colonel. Comrade Colonel."

Following dinner, we are joined in our compartment by Victor Petrovitch Zhukovski and his wife, Galina. He is a short, stocky coal miner from Karaganda. His wife is a tall, stunning woman, with a vivacious face. They arrive, accompanied by a sausage and a bottle of spirits.

A lively conversation ensues, despite the heat and cramped quarters. Galina is quite outspoken. The reforms are a disaster, she declares. Democracy is a farce. What is the use of talk, talk, talk when you can't afford to feed your family properly? She admits to being afraid for she does not know what can be done. She looks above for leadership and direction, and finds none. Yeltsin is denounced in no uncertain terms. Yet Kazakhstan is the republic in which she resides.

Victor Petrovitch speaks of wages. The average wage is about 3,000 rubles per month. Miners at Karaganda earn around 4,000 rubles per month and can earn more, as they are engaged in piecework. Railway workers make up to 18,000 rubles per month, considerably more than Mekhlis's wage, which is 11,000 rubles per month.

I express surprise at the miners' wage and the fact they are still on piecework. Victor Petrovitch becomes quite agitated. "We were betrayed by our union," he explains. He claims his former union was a pawn of the government. Now they are organizing a genuine union, one devoted to the interests of the members. They have already had a strike, which they lost. Yet they gained wide public support as they campaigned for wage increases for doctors, nurses, other healthcare workers, and teachers. All are underpaid, in comparison to some job classifications.

I am surprised to discover that he is familiar with the record of the National Union of Miners in the United Kingdom. He speaks with respect of their record of support for progressive causes. However, it becomes clear that his news of the union is dated. He is unaware of the setbacks suffered by both the union and the coal-mining industry in the United Kingdom.

We are approaching Penza and the party breaks up. I mention to Mekhlis that I have yet to speak to anyone who supports the economic reforms now being introduced in the former USSR. He replies that some find the new system attractive. There is a freedom now to make money

that was absent in the old order. Some enterprising people are taking advantage of this new opportunity. But many hesitate. What is the point to making more money as fast as it is being devalued? I ask him whether the old order was as good as people remember it. He replies that in one sense the answer is yes. Things have become far worse in the past two years. At the same time, the Soviet Union had reached a period of stagnation. The costs of the cold war and the Afghanistan war were bankrupting the nation. Something had to be done.

I ask why an answer is being sought in so-called free-market conditions instead of discovering a socialist route. The answer I receive is unclear and equivocal. It is suggested that visits to the West revealed a much more prosperous economy than the Soviet people had been taught to believe. Western movies, replayed on TV, painted a flattering picture of capitalism, discrediting Communist Party ideology and propaganda. Stagnation arose in a socialist, planned economy; therefore, socialism itself was seen by some to be problematic. The conversation becomes frustrating as it lacks a definitive thrust. What is to be done? No one seems to know.

22:29 hrs.: We arrive at Penza. I detrain to take a stroll and get a breath of fresh air, before retiring for the night. As I walk along the platform, I inspect the train. The dark green carriages are well built, but they have a grubby appearance. They all require a fresh coat of paint. The windows deserve a good scrub. The rolling stock rides well, but it is old.

I reboard and walk through the restaurant car. It is a filthy shambles. The linoleum on the floor is worn and dirty. The wooden tables and chairs are old, the kind you might find in the back room of a warehouse. At one end, empty carton boxes have been sloppily stacked on several tables, reducing the seating capacity. At the other end, two Gypsy women finish a meal of what might once have been stew. The waitress-clerk, along with her skirt and blouse, deserve a good wash. I have seen cleaner, neater, more inviting baggage cars in my time. What a shower, with outrageous prices to add insult to injury.

I detrain again and proceed to the head end. A diesel-electric engine, used for part of our journey, has been replaced by an electric engine; a large, impressive, stylish locomotive. There is something symbolic about a gleaming locomotive being coupled with ancient, grubby rolling stock. They get it right, then refuse to follow through. Why?

I am reminded of the duties assigned to our conductor. While Sleeping Beauty is no Clara, she goes through the motions. She thoughtfully put a glass jar on a small counter in the toilet, in which was placed water and herbs of some description. The effect has been to improve the aroma in that fearful place. And she has swept and washed the corridor, twice, on

each day. Why then does the corridor still appear grubby? It comes to me in a flash. She uses dirty water. Her mop is filthy. Her dusting rag is black with grime.

There is an exception — Sleeping Beauty's compartment. She has it fixed up as though it were a private bedroom, with nice curtains, flowers, little knickknacks. "Good for business," the Colonel had remarked when we both happened to pass by her open compartment door.

We get the green flag and I make haste to reboard. The Colonel insists on a nightcap.

Friday, June 12

07:11 hrs.: I am awoken by an argument between the Colonel and Valentina, as the train pulls into Raizk I. I learn later that the Colonel wishes to begin the day's festivities early, as this is the last leg of our journey. Valentina, on the other hand, was of the view that I deserved my sleep. A pal for life.

To no one's surprise, the Colonel's wishes prevail. I swing down from my berth, dress, hold my nose, make use of the toilet and shave.

When I return to the compartment, a feast has been laid out on our little counter-table. The Colonel retrieves one of his bags from under his berth and produces a glass jar, filled with a clear liquid.

"Benzene," he announces as Victor Petrovitch joins us from next door. Glasses are produced, Valentina shakes her head in disapproval and the first toast of the day is celebrated.

Within the hour, the Colonel's spirits are consumed and our little party is ordered to undertake a search for vodka. The restaurant car has none and we discover that we will have to wait until the train reaches the next town, Ryzan. The Colonel remarks that this state of affairs would never have come to pass if Malenkov had remained prime minister. "He was a true socialist," we are reminded. I wonder if Lenin ever recorded a similar sentiment — that is the equating of socialism with fine drink — in any of his vast collected works.

09:20 hrs.: The train arrives in Ryzan II station, running to time. Hurrah for the Soviet state railroad. Their trains leave on time and make up time when they are delayed. Now this is more like it.

It is a bright sunny morning. The station platform is crowded. Many people are buying ice cream, despite the early hour. The Colonel is the first to find a kiosk in which vodka is for sale. I make the requisite purchases in anticipation of a demanding morning.

I notice many young men wearing jogging suits or sport shirts with "Adidas" on them. They are imitation, I am told. The sports apparel is

Russian-made. The name of a foreign brand is sewn on afterwards. It is a status symbol; again, an explicit celebration of the Western, capitalist world.

We reboard the train and, under the Colonel's leadership and guidance, return to our duties. Only Valentina disapproves, with a certain air of resignation. One senses she has come to the conclusion that not much can be expected from the male gender. She is amused at our surprise when we discover that our fresh supplies have been exhausted within the hour.

The train gathers speed as we draw closer and closer to Moscow. Today is a holiday in the Russian Federation and the countryside is alive with people.

We fly past commuter trains, crammed with men, women and children, all heading out of the towns and cities for the countryside. The gardens about the *dachas* are a hive of activity. Men and women of all ages weeding, winnowing, watering. Many are in bathing suits, soaking up the sun. Children on the banks of creeks, fishing or splashing about. No one, it would seem, has a care in the world. Mighty Mother Russia on a sunny June day, at peace with herself and the world.

The train is approaching Moscow. The passengers in our carriage are scurrying about. The women change from their nightgowns, dressing gowns and slippers into street clothes. The men don shirts, ties and jackets. The kids are sent to wash their faces and comb their hair. Bags are retrieved from beneath the berths. Our little world is about to break apart, never to convene again. The anticipation of arrival is tempered by a reluctance to part and go our separate ways.

13:20 hrs.: The train arrives at the Kazanski Station, on time. Well done, Soviet state railways. You are up there with the best.

I give Valentina a big hug and a kiss. I promise to write. She scoffs at this, but I can tell that she is pleased. She is a good woman, and I have become very fond of her. I tell her that she is my Ukrainian girl friend. She blushes and beams at the same time.

I turn to the Colonel. His face is serious. He grasps my hand then hugs me, like a bear. He plants a kiss on both cheeks. His eyes fill with tears. "We are brothers, we are comrades, you and me," he announces gruffly. I promise to find some way to bring him to Canada. He takes me at my word. "You have a wife?" he inquires. His face lights up when I reply in the affirmative. "She will like you," I continue. "Of course," he beams modestly. Then he turns and marches off on his appointed duties.

Mekhlis and I gather our bags and make our way to the station, which is jammed with men, women and children. We push and elbow our way

through the dense crowd. Eventually we reach the exit and break out into the open, and the relief of fresh air.

To my surprise, Ivan Makarov, the learned secretary of the Russian Agricultural Academy of Sciences, arrives with a car and chauffeur. This is quite unexpected, as it is a holiday and Mekhlis informs me later that state-employed drivers are no longer as compliant as they used to be in the days of the USSR.

We chat with Makarov briefly. It is one of those unmemorable conversations about little of consequence. For reasons I cannot recall, I mention Leningrad and Makarov corrects me. "It is St. Petersberg now." Without thinking and forgetting my manners, I snap: "But surely it deserves to be remembered by the name it bore when its citizens turned the tide of World War II." Tears roll down Makarov's face and he embraces me. For once, there is no need for translation.

Mekhlis and I stow our gear in the car and drive off for Sheremetyevo airport. As we pull away from the station square I catch my last glimpse of Academician Makarov, standing erect on the sidewalk, his fist raised in salute.

Our drive to the airport is uneventful. I convert most of my rubles into American dollars. Mekhlis and I go to a kiosk for a farewell drink. The service is slow; the trade in Pepsi Cola is brisk. We are both tired and wish to put farewells behind us.

This we do and for the first time since I arrived in Moscow ten days ago I feel very much alone. The truth is, I don't want to leave, but I have no choice.

I decide to clear immigration and control. The Russian lassie in the employ of British Airways is very cheery and polite. But the young man at the first of two immigration check controls is rude and officious, in very good English.

I deliberately mistake his instructions, then smother him with apologies when his temperature rises. I finally arrange my papers in the order he requires and he passes me through, with a look of disgust on his face. I thank him warmly and wish him well, in passable Russian, satisfied that I have played a role in ruining but another day for him.

I queue with others, for the second passport inspection. Out of the blue, a young, well-dressed women breaks out of our line and skips to the front, pushing by a passenger whose turn has come. I mutter my disapproval in a loud voice, but my fellow passengers just shrug their shoulders. "It is done," the gentleman behind me explains in English, with a thick Russian accent.

Finally, I and the others clear the barrier and enter the world of duty-free shops, glittering bars and kiosks. No Russian currency, please.

I have time before my flight is called, time for a farewell dram. I approach the bar. A barmaid sees me standing, waiting to be served. She nevertheless completes her chore of cleaning glasses and ashtrays. Finished at last, she asks if there is anything I would like. Very polite. Very pleasant. Very Russian. Never interrupt the task of cleaning up by serving a customer. I finish my drink as my flight is called.

Welcome aboard British Airways flight 873, Boeing 767 flight to London. The cabin of the aircraft is bright and spotless. The cabin crew are neatly and smartly turned out. Everyone is attentive and polite. It is embarrassing.

We lift off at 17:35 hrs., on time. It is announced that we will ascend to a cruising altitude of 39,000 feet. In three-and-one-half hours, we will be in London.

I am restless. Normally, I would relish a trip to London. Not this late afternoon. The memories of the past ten days preoccupy, amuse and trouble me. Above all, I cannot sort them out.

I recall an observation made about the USSR by Winston Churchill, during the early days of World War II. "It is," he broadcasted, "a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma."[10] Just so. How, under these circumstances, does one sort out and make sense of one's impressions?

A smart, cheery stewardess interrupts my labours and offers me a gin and tonic. "Anything else, Sir?" she inquires. "A slice or two of cucumber would do," I reply. "I am sorry, Sir. We do not serve cucumber with our drinks," she explains in a slightly patronizing tone of voice. Serves me right. Should have brought my own.

I return to my impressions. For the past seventy-five years, the republics which made up the former USSR were partners in an unprecedented undertaking: the creation of a modern, industrial society out of the ashes of a devastating civil war and on the foundations of a crumbling autocratic empire that still retained feudal economic and social customs.

To that end, a political party of revolutionaries acquired power and eventually established a formidable, bureaucratic dictatorship that gave to itself and to the state the leading and decisive role in transforming the new USSR. This they did, despite the interruption, terror and unbelievable mass destruction brought about by the Nazi invasion during World War II.

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10 The broadcast took place over the BBC on October 1, 1939. See W. Manchester, *The Last Lion: Winston Spencer Churchill, 1932-1940* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1988), 593.

But it would appear that something went seriously wrong. The building, the industrialization, the remarkable achievements in culture, sports and outer space have suddenly come to a halt. The former USSR is beginning to display some of the characteristics of a third-world country: economic stagnation and paralysis; a dependence on natural resources, foreign markets, capital and know-how; collapse of the economic, social and political infrastructure. Yet this impression is profoundly misleading. Most of the former republics of the USSR have a well-developed, diversified industrial base. Their populations are well educated. They enjoy traditions of excellence in science and engineering. The ingredients to grow and develop are there. What is missing is the failure to follow through, to achieve the promise.

Now the riddles within the riddle. Public enterprise has heretofore been declared to be the only legal, politically acceptable, and moral road to the New Jerusalem. What impression does one form of public enterprise? Public housing that requires paint, repairs, more space and redesign? Public factories with a record and reputation for shoddy workmanship? Public shops that treat their customers with ill-concealed indifference at best and contempt at worse? State and collective farms that fail — during times of favourable weather — to deliver the goods? Public parks, buildings and spaces that have become testimonies to neglect, poor workmanship and vandalism?

Here are the people of a once-powerful nation, resorting to private plots of land to provide their own vegetables and, in some cases, meat. And what of the private *dachas* that dot these thousands of hectares of private plots? Instances of human ingenuity, imagination. In so many cases, a colourful and defiant repudiation of public housing and state enterprise.

And yet... The Mafia. The plethora of private kiosks in Moscow's streets. The old and young vendors on railroad platforms, throughout Russia and Kazakhstan. They are seen, as far as I can make out, for what they are: grubby, grasping, greedy parasites. More important, are these the men and women and are theirs the economic practices that will restore some measure of prosperity and hope?

Perhaps, at least if the celebration of the West proves to be more than a passing fad. One is struck by the appeal of the capitalist West, be it a preference for Western consumer goods, labels and symbols or a fascination over Western pop music, movies and TV programs.

Indeed, it is deeper than this. Many agronomists continue to view family farming in North America as a panacea in the face of evidence that invites a more critical and cautious assessment.

Senior civic and regional administrators and planners include many

who uncritically turn west for advice and example. Even the Russian government, led by Mr. Yeltsin, has invited several senior Harvard economists to Moscow to guide his administration in bringing about a "market" economy. In this particular instance, one would have thought that it might have been more expeditious to invite leading capitalists to set up shop in the Russian Federation, on their terms. One has to wonder just how serious Mr. Yeltsin and his ilk really are.

This celebration of the West, this uncriticial willingess to turn to capitalist societies for capital, goods, services and advice is not only in evidence, it is manifested without shame, without embarrassment. One is left with the impression that many if not all of the citizens of the former USSR have lost confidence in themselves, have lost pride in their unmistakable, historic accomplishments, have lost faith in their capacity to take charge of the crisis in which they find themselves and change their circumstances for the better.

This lack of faith in themselves takes several forms. I recall the tendency of residents of Kazakhstan to blame "Russia" for their woes.[11] More pervasive is the despairing "I do not know" when the inevitable question "What is to be done?" is raised — even among scientists groomed and trained in the Communist Party.

One cannot escape the suspicion that the Community Party itself may well have fathered this political paralysis. For if it has, this failure does not appear to be countered with a strong, public commitment to open, democratic customs and practices. One suspects that many would forego an openness in political discourse and practice for reliable food at affordable prices. For a small but growing number of unemployed workers, a dependable job has come to represent an improvement in the objective circumstances of life.

And here, one suspects, lies a cruel dilemma. Has employment become for many, if not all, a sentence of confinement to a mindless, impersonal bureaucracy? I saw many people at work — in shops, offices, restaurants, railroads. I saw many more going to and coming from work

11 This tendency, I discover, is a reflection of the historic interdependence between the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan. The September 15 edition of *Izvestia* carried a story by an historian and journalist which argues in part: "It is well known that these republics were always the most consistent supporters of a united Union and that independence by no means came as a result of the victory of national liberation forces... And now the break with Russia is more economically painful... Take Northern Kazakhstan, for example. Its economy would not last a day without its ties to the Urals and Siberia, since it is just an extension of the Urals-Siberian economic complexes. The economic dependence on Russia ... is still almost absolute." Cited in *Current Digest of the Post-Soviet Press* 44, no. 37 (1992).

— on the streets of Moscow, and in the streetcars; scrambling to and from commuter trains across Russia and Kazakhstan. There was little life in so many faces, so little spirit in the way so many walked.

There were exceptions: my scientific colleagues, the workers at the experimental farm at Shortandy. But unless I am mistaken, the quality of life in the workplace was never a pressing priority for the political leaders of the old regime. A strange oversight on the part of those who insisted that, in matters of building socialism, they were exemplary. I recall Valentina's observation: "We used to believe in them. Now we are not sure."

There is another troubling concern, one that brings me back home. To their credit, the old Bolsheviks endeavoured to address the issue of relations among ethnic and national groups in terms of considerations that can be described as sensitive and humane — the cultivation of curiosity in the face of different ways of behaving and appearing, the conversion of curiosity into understanding, then respect for differences. And the final achievement — the discovery of pleasure in, then the celebration of, differences in human appearances, language, customs and conduct.

Kazakhstan has been an interesting proving ground for these Bolshevik objectives. As late as the nineteenth century, the nomadic tribes that comprised the Kazakh "nation" had sought the protection of Czarist Russia from their marauding neighbours to the south and east. Following the 1917 revolution, the Soviet government built on this precedent. An official document of the Kazakhstan government, published in 1987, put it this way:

> The Kazakh people saw its future in the union with Russia. Friendship with the Russians helped the Kazakhs to get acquainted with European culture. ... Now Kazakhstan is inhabited by representatives of over 100 nationalities. They speak their mother tongue, teach it to their children in schools. Books and newspapers are published in Kazakh, Russian, Uigur, German and Korean, there are national theatres, variety ensembles, radio and television broadcast national programmes. This all has become an achievement of Soviet Kazakhstan thanks to the nationalities policy of the CPSU, friendship and fraternity of Soviet peoples. [*sic*]

An attractive claim, even if it is compromised by some difficult developments of record. Many of the individuals I met in Kazakhstan are the sons and daughters of families sent into exile in the republic from other republics within the former USSR. So much for Stalin's estimation of the value of the vast interior land mass that is the traditional home of the nomadic Kazakhs. A place fit for exile, regardless of what the locals thought.

It becomes more problematic. In the 1950s, the virgin-land policy of the Khrushchev government ran into opposition not only from the pastural

Kazakh people of northern Kazakhstan but from both the Communist Party and government of the republic.[12]

No doubt this opposition was dismissed as a manifestation of resistance to modernization and progress. And so the nomadic Kazakhs were cleared off their ancestral lands, as the Plains Indians were cleared off the Canadian Prairies in the 1870s, to make way for a new investment frontier, based on modern agriculture. The comparison is disturbing.

Then the matter of language. Russian — it is the language of the Kazakhstan I came in contact with. Will this continue? And what does this mean for the majority of the republic's residents, who have either lost the gift for speaking in the Kazakh tongue, or never acquired it?

It is more than an issue of language. I have seen enough to recognize that Russians dominate the republics of the former USSR in more than language. Local and regional railroad timetables record departures and arrivals in Moscow time. Until the breakup of the Union, planning for economic and scientific endeavours was centred in Moscow. One senses that the phrase "USSR" had become a synonym for all things Russian.

The comparison with Canada is unsettling. How do we compare with the former USSR, or with Kazakhstan, for that matter? Would Canadians of aboriginal ancestry identify with the Kazakhs? Would French Canadians find the Russian presence and influence in Kazakhstan reminiscent of English-speaking Canadian domination of Canada and, until the 1960s, Quebec? Would English-speaking Canadians discover an empathy with the Slavic populations of Kazakhstan, wondering whether the hegemony of both was about to be compromised?

Questions/Riddles

My thoughts turn to the scientists I have met. They are an exceptional collection of colleagues. Their commitment to their work stands out. Their interest in and knowledge about Canada is remarkable. Their curiosity about the outside world bespeaks a spirit of adventure; it is infectious. They appear far more interested in establishing international contacts and dialogue than many of their Canadian counterparts.

There is something else that intrigues me. Until the breakup of the USSR, scientists educated there were presumed to have received a grounding in the philosophy and political economy of Marx and Engels. Whatever else may be said of their works, Marx and Engels insisted on viewing the world dialectically and comprehensively.

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12 See C. Zoerb, "The Virgin Lands Territory: Plans, Performance, Prospects," *Studies on the Soviet Union* 3, no. 4 (1964).

My impression of the Soviet scientific enterprise suggests that these two theoretical and methodological imperatives have been ignored. I was struck, first of all, by the division of labour among Soviet scientists and their unwillingess to comment on, or be drawn into, a discussion concerning matters which fell beyond the boundaries of their speciality. One is reminded of a similar tendency among Canadian scientists: an affinity for intense specialization and an aversion to broader, multi- and interdisciplinary scholarship.

There was something else: the absence of a dialectical turn of mind among the scientists with whom I conversed. The logic among the agronomists I met was identical to that employed by my Canadian colleagues, most of whom have never read Marx and Engels. For example, there is the presumption, in both nations, that it is possible to discover a policy that will correct the devastation of fragile prairie lands in Canada and Kazakhstan through soil cultivating/crop harvesting practices. One would not expect Canadian soil scientists to warn that over time such a policy and the practices which follow from it will develop contradictions, transforming a solution into a new and unforeseen problem. Our scientists do not think that way. Nor, apparently, do our colleagues in Russia and Kazakhstan.

Enough. The mind grows weary. The plane begins its descent into Heathrow Airport. I allow myself to warm to the memories of the many remarkable men and women who have come into my life. How does one ever repay their trust and generosity?

Appendix A

Memorandum Concerning a Draft Proposal for an International Comparative Study of Soil Conservation Policies and Practices: Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan

PREAMBLE

1.0. It is proposed to design and undertake a comparative study of soil-conservation policies and practices in the northern prairie region of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the southern prairie region of the province of Saskatchewan.

2.0. It is noted that while the two regions designated for study are geographically comparable, their histories, political economies and cultures are different.

3.0. These considerations notwithstanding, soil erosion and land degradation have become serious problems in both regions.

4.0. It is acknowledged that the central issue is not the environment, delicate and demanding as it is. Rather, soil erosion and land degradation have become a function of the agricultural practices in both the republic and the province.

5.0. It is further acknowledged that the development of appropriate soil-conservation policies and practices is problematic in both the Republic of Kazakhstan and the province of Saskatchewan. This study represents a joint, cooperative venture to find appropriate answers.

OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH PROGRAM

6.0. Soil erosion and land degradation have arisen in the prairie regions of Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan as a result of a number of different, but related considerations, including:

- 6.1. the nature of demand for food products
- 6.2. the organization of production
- 6.3. methods of cultivation and harvesting
- 6.4. technology for cultivation and harvesting
- 6.5. production knowledge and traditions
- 6.6. cultural values and practices.

7.0. The first objective of the study, then, will be to describe, analyse and explain how soil erosion and land degradation came about in Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan. It will be useful to begin with a description and analysis of the nature of the demand for food products (international market versus command economy), then consider the evolution of the forces and relations of production in response to demand, keeping in mind that non-economic considerations such as culture, values, historical heritages, etc., have a bearing on the form and characteristics of the mode of production.

8.0. In both Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan, science has been called upon to provide answers to a wide range of agricultural problems related to cultivation, harvesting, the forces and relations of production, storage, marketing, etc.

9.0. Yet the scientific community in Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan did not prevent the advent of soil erosion and land degradation.

10.0. It will therefore be useful to describe and analyse the scientific enterprise in both the republic and the province with a view to determining what role it played in bringing about or encouraging farm-production practices which result in soil erosion and land degradation. This second objective of the study might begin with the assumptions science takes for granted and conclude with an examination of how scientific knowledge is disseminated.

11.0. Finally, steps have been taken in both Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan to create soil-conservation policies and develop soil-conservation practices. A third objective of this study will be to describe and analyse these developments, paying particular attention to the role of the state and the role of agricultural producers in the process.

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

12.0. The issues of soil erosion and soil conservation include considerations which go beyond the boundaries of any of the scientific disciplines which have an interest in their investigation. For example, the destruction of arable land is, in the first instance, a physical problem; the proper concern of the soil scientist. But insofar as the destruction of land is brought about through human intervention, the problem becomes an issue for the social scientist. Even here, the issue is complex. In Saskatchewan, for example, farmers often claim that they cannot afford to observe soil-conservation practices in their farming operation; a situation which offends their value system. This is more than an issue of political economy. It is, in addition, a sociological problem.

13.0. This being the case, it will be necessary to design a study that is multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary in nature.

14.0. While the focus of the study is on two vast prairie regions within the republic and the province, it will be necessary, in respect of some research questions, to undertake case studies of "representative" agricultural communities. In the case of Saskatchewan, one community will be located in the Palliser Triangle (light brown soil) and the other in the Parkland (dark brown soil).

15.0. Insofar as community case studies are concerned, it will be advantageous to involve the farm producers both in the design of the study and in the dissemination of the results.

16.0. The strength of the proposed study lies in the provision for comparative analysis. It bears repeating that soil erosion has arisen from farming practices in both a capitalist and socialist mode of production. Given comparable environments, comparative analysis should enable the research teams to identify those causal factors common to both modes.

ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

17.0. It will be necessary to design the study to ensure that similar research questions are being investigated in both Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan and that the research methods and procedures in both "regions" are comparable.

18.0. The Canadian Plains Research Center of the University of Regina will be responsible for organizing the Canadian side of the study. The Kazakhstan side of the project will be the responsibility of the Institute for Grain Research.

19.0. It will be desirable for the scientific teams from the republic and the province to meet at least three times for the purpose of designing the study, comparing interim results, and discussing the findings and conclusions of the study. For funding purposes, these will be considered as international conferences and exchanges.

20.0. It will be necessary to work out and agree to methods of, and responsibilities for, funding the study.

21.0. The results of the study will be published in English and Russian. The Canadian Plains Research Center will be responsible for publishing the English report.

22.0. At the conclusion of the study, an international conference will be held at which the results of the study will be made public and to which agricultural producers from Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan will be invited.

CONCLUSION

23.0. These recommendations are in the form of a proposal and are submitted for the purpose of discussion and negotiation. Any agreement entered into must be by mutual consent.

24.0. The prairie regions of Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan are delicate and physically demanding environments. They can and will support human life if and when humans learn to relate to the physical environment in ways that respect and sustain it.

25.0. It would be to the advantage of Canada if scientists and agricultural producers in Kazakhstan and Saskatchewan learned how to do this, together.

Select Bibliography

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Post-Soviet Geography. Founded in 1960 as *Soviet Geography*, this is an interdisciplinary journal dealing with historical, economic, political and social dimensions to life in the former USSR. Published monthly, except in July and August.

Soviet Sociology. A bi-monthly journal containing unabridged translations of research articles and essays appearing in major social science journals published in the former USSR.

In June 1992, Dr. James N. McCrorie, Executive Director of the Canadian Plains Research Center, visited the Republic of Kazakhstan as a guest of the Institute for Grain Research. The purpose of the trip, which was part of an ongoing academic exchange, was to explore and identify common issues and problems, with a view to initiating and developing cooperative, comparative research between the prairie regions of Canada and Kazakhstan.

As a part of this trip, his second in as many years, Dr. McCrorie kept a detailed diary of his experiences. His observations of the changes taking place in the region in the wake of the breakup of the Soviet Union are reproduced herein.

OP 4/77 pp./$6.00/ISBN 0-88977-076-X
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